

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

***Saving Faces:** Plastic surgeon Iain Hutchison fixes his patients' broken faces, but the real healing happens when someone listens to their stories.*

Tony Kahn:

Hi everybody. This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. We all know the phrase "losing face," right? We hear a lot about it in the news. It's the act of losing your status or your standing among your peers. But what happens when you lose your face, not symbolically, but for real, through an accident or, or an illness or a birth defect that's so disfiguring, that even your best friends find it hard to look at you without shock or fear or disgust? What does it mean to be hit by something so physically and socially disabling, and how do you recover from it? Today's Morning Story is about a plastic surgeon in England named Iain Hutchison, his patients, and the unique form of treatment that he came up with that literally made them all better. We call today's Morning Story *Saving Faces*.

First patient's [Chris Pavlo's] story:

In November 1992, I was attacked. I'd come out from a Chinese takeaway, a guy pushed me and I scalded myself with the soup. I chased after him and he led me into a trap with six other guys with baseball bats who beat upon my head and fractured my skull. They, they had to operate fast. The friend that was in the ambulance ...

Second patient's [Roland Scott's] story:

See, what I had was a toothache that my dentist could not remove because I had an abscess. I was sent to the hospital. And they took a biopsy. He said, "Well, you have cancer but it is spreading rapid." They said they were going to cut up under my nose, around and underneath me eye, all me upper jaw ...

Tony Kahn:

Besides their trauma, Londoners Chris Pavlo and Roland Scott have something else in common, the surgeon that saved their lives and reconstructed their faces, Iain Hutchison.

Iain Hutchison:

I'm what's called an oral and maxillofacial surgeon. What it means is people who've been in car crashes, people who have been assaulted and had facial injuries, cancer. If you change somebody's face, you change their psyche because of the way people look at you, or the way you feel people look at you.

Chris Pavlo (first patient):

I looked like a psycho. I had a scar going from ear to ear, across a, a bald head, an eye that had slightly dropped, a horrific scar on my forehead, which was constantly

weeping. You could say, “God, that man is so hard. You, you don’t want to mess with him.” And it was completely the opposite ‘cause on the inside, I was shaking literally.

Roland Scott (second patient):

I had to have radiotherapy, and that was worse, believe it or not. They make a plastic mask, and to make that mask, they cover you up and give you a tube to breathe through, like a little straw. And they cover the whole face in this, like, jelly and then cover that in plaster of Paris. Your nose is blocked, your eyes are covered, you can’t see, you, very hard to breathe, and you are totally and utterly on your own, and it is terrifying. There’s not another word for it – terrifying.

Tony Kahn:

Roland’s surgeon, Iain Hutchison, deals with the external scars of trauma. But he knows that for a full cure, far deeper wounds have to be treated, too. His mother, a doctor, fled the Nazis from Austria in 1938. He grew up in an apartment over her office, influenced by her passion for medicine and music and painting. When she died a few years ago, he took the money she left and applied it to an even greater legacy, her belief that people need medicine and art to be well. He set up a program for a hospital artist-in-residence. And he hired a Scottish portraitist named Mark Gilbert to paint his patients before, after, and even during surgery.

Mark Gilbert:

I couldn’t believe what I was looking at to see the, the head, which is such a sensitive area at the best of times, you know, opened up in such a, in such a sort of brutal way really. You know, if I do a normal portrait, you take a normal face. You turn it into something special; that’s your aim, whereas here, you’re not having to make it more special, you’re almost having to do justice to the subject that you’re dealing with.

Iain Hutchison:

What I said to Mark at the outset was, “Look. You, you’ve got a free rein to do whatever you want and help the patients come through what is probably the most emotional event of their lives. I just want you to paint faces.”

Tony Kahn:

Just paint faces – some of the most hideous faces in the world.

Iain Hutchison:

Every day, the, the secretaries would come in to see Mark painting. The patients used to come up and see other people being painted, so Mark became a kind of fulcrum around which we all revolved.

Chris Pavlo:

When Mark done the paintings, I had to relive the night to tell him the story, yah. Brought up a lot of things – how I felt now, what do I feel about the people that, that had beaten me up.

Roland Scott:

It was a relief really. It became, for me, a therapy, knowing that he knew what I was going through. It, I don't know, it, it just makes you better. It, it really does help to heal you. You know. I wouldn't have got through it without it.

Mark Gilbert:

Yeagh, absolutely surprised me. Each time I would think I would be going too far, the patients themselves would say, "No, we want to see it. Carry on." You felt valued, which was – terrific!

Iain Hutchison:

He was acting like a counsel. He was listening to the patients. They were telling him things they wouldn't tell their own family – anybody else. The patients love me and adore me, which is why I'm doing this in the first place, and they very often don't want to say to me, "Doctor, I'm not very happy about this," or "I'm not very happy about that." Because they feel that it's hurtful to me. I began to understand much, much more about what affected them and what helped them and what didn't help them.

Tony Kahn:

Mark had originally thought his portraits might end up in a medical school. But galleries in England and Europe were interested in putting them on display, and last year, a selection opened to the public at London's prestigious National Portrait Gallery.

Mark Gilbert:

I was unsure as to how the exhibition was going to be received, that it could just be seen as, you know, a sort of Chamber of Horrors, or as a, as a sort of a gratuitous kind of freak show or something like that.

Chris Pavlo:

People have said, "It's disgusting," and said, "It's not art." And I've replied, "Well, what is it then, if it's not art?"

Roland Scott:

A woman at the National Portrait Gallery said to me, "Why did you do it?" and I said, "Well, why not? The surgeon saved my life. The least I can do is sit while somebody paints me, surely." [laughs] You know, I explained everything that I went through and how it helped me, and I think they got away a bit more in enlightened.

Chris Pavlo:

I think, when I, when I tell the story to people, when, when I tell them what happened, you can see that they're amazed and, and they look at you as if to say, "Wow, you, you came through that? What, what, what is your power?" And I said, "Well, I'm not Superman. You know, everyone has got the power within them to deal with life's problems."

Mark Gilbert:

At the National Portrait Gallery, there must have been about, without exaggerating, maybe about a thousand comments, and there was about five that felt that it was maybe inappropriate. And I can remember, there was one that wrote her husband had thrown acid in her face, and she'd written all about her experiences, how she felt about the exhibition, and then the last line was that she was now going home to do a self-portrait.

Chris Pavlo:

You can become a very, very angry person, and you can want to seek revenge. I took a different path. I grew. grew up with conflict. My mother's side of the family is Irish, from the North, wars everywhere. My dad was Greek Cypriot and he lost his land and everything due to the Turkish invasion in, in '74. And, I said to him once, "You know, you've got to let this go. You've really got to let it go 'cause it will kill you." And he said, "Son, I can never let it go. I can never for- forget." And it did kill him. And I learned through that, that I had to let this go – completely.

Roland Scott:

Sometimes you just think, "Oh, what next? What else is going to happen?" But you get through it, you know.

Tony Kahn:

Would you have rather that none of this had ever happened to you?

Roland Scott:

No. No. I was very self-centered, you know, me -- and that was it -- me and my family. And as far as I was concerned, the rest of the world never existed. But now, it's, it totally changed my life around. Life's not kind to anybody. You have to take your chance and deal with it. You went through a traumatic time, but you got through it, with the help of others. Pass it on to other people.

[Flute music]

Tony Kahn:

That's today's *Morning Story, Saving Faces*. That was a piece that I did a while ago for a Public Radio show called *The World*, and, somehow, it's one of those stories that strikes me as being ultimately about the power of story. I'm here with Gary Mott in the studio. Gar, one of the victims of this said, in the course of this, and it really struck me hearing it again, knowing that someone else knows what you're going through makes it better.

You get a chance to know what it's like to be the other guy, and the other guy gets a chance know that you know it, and that in itself is healing. It's, it's good medicine.

Gary Mott:

And the power of forgiveness. You know, so many people are crippled by wrongs done to them in their past [Tony murmurs agreement] and just the, the freedom that comes from forgiving someone, that jumped out at me too.

Tony Kahn:

Letting go.

Gary Mott:

Yeah.

Tony Kahn:

Letting go. You know, and also giving back. You know, the other part of this story that struck me was that these people who had all been seen as victims were actually given an opportunity to give back to the public by teaching them what the process was like, and that was a very important part of their feeling better. Giving is not a one-way street. If the person who gets doesn't have the opportunity to give something back to you, they're going to feel a little bit less than human. I think that the genius of Iain Hutchison's part was that he figured there was a lot he didn't know about what he was an expert at, and the only way that he could find out about it was to bring in an artist. What a, what a great idea, artist-in-residence, artist-in-residence anywhere! I've always wanted to be – and if anybody's listening and wants to give a grant – I'm all for it, to be the artist-in-residence in Congress, for a year. I'd like to spend a year just getting everybody in Congress to tell me one story about something that happened to them that was really significant. Forget about the politics and whether they're left or right, Republican, Democrat, Independent, just tell me a story, and those collective stories, I think, might actually help people understand a little better about what's really going on.

Gary Mott:

When you do have that grant ... [laughter] The first question you ask:

Tony Kahn:

Yeah? Right ...

Gary Mott:

"When was the first time you forgave someone?"

Tony Kahn:

Yeah. What a great question, Gar. You have a piece of mail there that we got from someone.

Gary Mott:

Yeah. I do, I do. We got a great letter from Charlie Chou in the Seattle area. "Thanks for your great program. I listen to you each week via podcast as I commute to work on my bike. I work in Seattle and live on Vashon Island in the South Puget Sound ..."

Tony Kahn:

Oh that's beautiful.

Gary Mott:

It's, it's gorgeous. "... where access is limited to ferry boat only." So how does he bike to work in Seattle? "I enjoy the incredible beauty of the Olympic Mountains and Sound as I ride in each day and the views are perfectly complemented by your uplifting personal tales. Keep up the great work."

Tony Kahn:

Ahhh.

Gary Mott:

Thanks Charlie.

Tony Kahn:

Thanks a lot. I was just out in Seattle; we were doing a taping for a show called *Says You*. I asked a local guy who happened to be a jazz musician, I said, "So listen, what's one thing I should look for that I would never notice about Seattle if I didn't live here for a long time?" and he said, snapping his fingers, he said, "Well, man," he said, "you gotta understand." He said that, "everything on the surface here looks pretty laid back and quiet," he said, "but look a little deeper and it's really crazy man." [laughter] So, so I kept my, my eyes open and I saw like a lot of like really crazy stuff, you know, like a real spirit of independence, and, and artistry, in Seattle, so I was delighted to be out there.

So, in real time, not podcast time, in real time, this is the day before Thanksgiving, the biggest travel in the year. So please all of you, if you're listening to this in real time, be careful when you're driving. And while we're on the subject of Thanksgiving, I can't proceed further without rendering deep thanks unto the source of our own stuffing week after week, the people who have supported this podcast pretty much since the start, Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software. You can reach them at I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H dot com <ipswitch.com>. Be safe. Be full. Be thankful. We're thankful to you.

Gary Mott:

And we want to give a shout out to our pals Alex and Laurie from Ipswitch. We had a great lunch with them yesterday, even if I did pay. [Tony laughs heartily] And, if you have some spare time this weekend, and who doesn't in between football games and

snow and whatever else comes your way, our website, <wgbh.org/morningstories> and send us an email. We love hearing from you: <morningstories@WGBH.org>.

Tony Kahn:

Thanks, everybody, and be sure to check in next Friday for another podcast. We'll see you then. Bye.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Susan MacLeod