

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

This is All So . . . So . . . Unh! Polly Peterson gets the word from her stepmother-in-law.

Tony Kahn:

Hi everybody, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. We received an email from Polly Peterson, who lives not too far from us. She says, "A couple of weeks ago my husband Jon and I went to Florida to visit his stepmother, Doris. We'd been out of touch with her for a while, due in part to her several marriages since Jon's father's death. When we heard she now had Alzheimer's, we were determined to visit her while we still could. Visiting an Alzheimer's patient is always a strange, almost surreal experience. Seeing people who were competent adults leading full lives such a short time ago who are now in a near-comatose state or behaving like unruly children is disconcerting, to say the least." From there you would assume this letter would go even deeper into what is obviously a very gloomy situation but [Tony chuckles] it did not. In fact, Polly's with us now. Welcome, Polly.

Polly Peterson

Hello.

Tony Kahn:

You wrote a poem about what did happen during this visit.

Polly Peterson

Yes, exactly. Doris – we were very fond of Doris, but as I say, we'd been somewhat separated from her over the years. The poem is called "Visiting Doris."

Tony Kahn:

Could you read it to us?

Polly Peterson

Looking for Doris, we scan the
strange groups of women and men –
crumpled bodies slumping in chairs,
or drifting down hallways, like faded balloons
from a celebration
long past.

When we find her at last,

she is radiant! Always a beauty,
she is beautiful still.

"I love you!" she tells each of us
earnestly. "This is beautiful.

You are beautiful!

This is all so, so

. . . Unh!"

She gestures with her hand,
pushing her thought out
into the world, giving it emphasis,
and we agree.

This moment

is simply

. . . Unh!

We've brought coffee ice cream, with sprinkles,
her favorite.

She is happy to eat it,

and happier still

to gaze into our eyes,

touch hands

or an arm.

"You are so beautiful!" she tells me.

Gazing into each other's eyes,

we suddenly burst into laughter

at the very same moment,

giddy with surprise and gladness.

Look! We've spent our whole lives

worrying about all of That,

and in the end it is only This.

Beauty!

Arm in arm,

we take a walk around the nursing home,

circling past familiar sights,

uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh,

each turn revealing a new delight--

the grass, the palm trees, the flowering hibiscus,

the pathway to the small gazebo -

everything is so - , so -

. . . Unh!

Almost takes your breath away.

Back inside, Doris is bedazzled
by a young caretaker
standing near the kitchen,
gemstones sparkling on her earlobes,
braces glittering on her teeth.
Cradling the firm young face in her hand,
she gazes deeply into the young woman's eyes,
and tells her she is beautiful, she is so, so beautiful,
and of course we see it now, too. How could
we not have noticed? This young worker
is radiant, incandescent: beauty incarnate.
And so are we.

When we're driving away,
the sunshine looks like
someone's idea of heaven,
luminous rays streaming out from
canyons in the cloud cover,
bright, then veiled,
then bursting through again,
like the light that shines
through Doris's eyes.
She's not the person she used to be,
Not the person we knew.
Nothing left now
but love.

[Sounds: outdoors, quiet breeze, birds twittering far away]

Tony Kahn:

Whatever state that woman is in, it's a contagious condition. I feel like I'm in the presence of some moment of grace.

Polly Peterson

That's exactly how I felt. It's as though nothing is left except that spark at the core of every person, and the miraculous thing is that's all she sees in everyone else. What a gift! [Polly laughs with delight]

Tony Kahn:

And not -- A strange bargain! Darkness isn't just darkness; it may be a, a necessary

condition to have these [Tony chuckles] moments of grace.

Polly Peterson

[Polly chuckles] You know, I think you're right, and to have Doris' daughter tell me that she thinks Doris has never been happier . . .

Tony Kahn:

Mm.

Polly Peterson

. . . is another paradox . . .

Tony Kahn:

Mm-hmm.

Polly Peterson

. . . because this is not a state in which Doris would ever have wished to be, I assume.

Tony Kahn:

Yeah.

Polly Peterson

And yet, she was always so concerned about what people thought of her, and pleasing everyone, and now she's just pleased. And being loved back! There really is something that's still the self, even when everything else is gone, and it matters.

[Pause]

Tony Kahn:

'Preciate it.

Polly Peterson

Thank you for having me. [emotion in her voice turns to a laugh]

Tony Kahn:

How do we spell "unh"?

[Tony and Polly laugh]

Polly Peterson

U-N-H, I chose. [Polly chuckles]

Tony Kahn:

U-N-H. With an exclamation mark?

Polly Peterson

I like that. Yes.

Tony Kahn:

[Tony and Polly laugh] I love it! It's all so . . . unh! Thanks, Polly.

Polly Peterson

Thank you, Tony.

[Sound: outdoors, birds, traffic in the distance]

Tony Kahn:

We're outside right now in Studio "B," at long last, "B" for "Harvard Business School." It's getting to be lovely out here. Making it no less lovely is Gary Mott. How you doing, Gar?

Gary Mott

Good morning, Tony. Where do you think grace comes from?

Tony Kahn:

It's like a little keyhole. It's a little view of something that, that's beyond. It brings its own little piece of eternity in that instance [Tony snickers] that we see it, you know?

Gary Mott

Right. That's what it's all about.

Tony Kahn:

Have you ever had things just so totally turn around for you, like where you . . . in the midst of one of, you know, an incredibly dark period, all of a sudden out of nowhere the pressure disappeared, the keyhole opened, and you're looking through into a whole other scene? Has that ever happened for you?

Gary Mott

Something as simple as breaking down on the highway and in a snowstorm . . .

Tony Kahn:

Mm-hm.

Gary Mott

. . . and having a neighbor drive by and assist.

Tony Kahn:

Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

Gary Mott

Something as simple as that, to something as complex as, you know, I don't know what to do, where to turn . . .

Tony Kahn:

Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

Gary Mott

. . . in a situation with my family, my children, and waking up the next day or having something happen that is just a moment of grace.

Tony Kahn:

Yeah. It's funny that this story should turn up at a time of year where we're celebrating leaving the darkness and headed toward the light. I mean, we've got Easter and I just came back from a Passover Seder on Cape Cod and I ran into an old friend of mine I hadn't seen in over a year there, and she said that she'd been through a really hard year, and, and that things had suddenly started to get better for her. And I said, "Well, how did that happen?" She said, "Well, all of a sudden, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the sun rising, and after about a minute or so the sun starts to get up there in the sky and I started to feel like, I think things are going to be a lot better now." [Tony laughs] So she had one of those moments of grace, too.

Gary Mott

Tony, I equate grace with peace, an inner peace, and those are moments that I can say, you know, it's going to be okay. That inner peace comes from a strong faith. But, for other people, you know, we've all got to find our way.

Tony Kahn:

Whatever word you use for it, you know – grace, hope, spring – there's definitely something out there that keeps on coming back and, and it seems to be back again now. So, thank heavens for that. And thank heavens, while we're at it, for Ipswitch and for the help that they've given us for our podcast. They're a leader in a file transfer software, and you can find out about them by going to their website at <ipswitch.com>, I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H.

Gary Mott

And thanks to all our podcast listeners out there for going to iTunes and giving us some tremendous reviews.

Tony Kahn:

It has been fantastic.

Gary Mott

Fantastic reading.

Tony Kahn:

You're all such amazing writers. You express yourselves beautifully, and please don't stop now! [Tony laughs]

Gary Mott

[Chuckling] Hey! Send those stories along.

Tony Kahn:

[Still laughing] They make Gary feel a lot better, I'll tell you that. Same here.

Gary Mott

<morningstories@wgbh.org> - We wanna, wanna see whatcha got.

Tony Kahn:

It's the kind of thing that just turns your head around, just like Polly said in her poem. We spend all our time gettin' lost in that dark old stuff called That - really, look around - it can also be about This:

Polly Peterson

The world is beautiful! [Tony and Polly laugh] That's it, guys!

[End of recording]

Transcribed by Georgia Buchert

Notes from transcriber:

I had a realization about Tony Kahn while transcribing this. Unless I'm reading him wrong, he often processes tender emotions and ideas with laughter - not the mocking kind of laughter, but the sort that good-naturedly displaces a catch in the voice or a blinked-at tear. Am I right? It's a laugh that embodies and celebrates the grace spoken of in this podcast, yields to the beautiful, and accepts life's ironies with a certain lovely

joy.

It was a good experience, spending time with this episode. I remembered a dear elderly woman named Maureen. I met her when I was newly married and the two of us became great friends. Maureen was ancient, really, in her nineties, and time had taken away most of her hearing, her sight, and her mobility. Unlike Doris, Maureen retained all of her mental faculties – and what a mind she had! Clear as a bright sunny day, and just as warming. But like Doris, she genuinely seemed to see nothing but beauty all around her. She had a gentle, tolerant spirit, an unfailing and deep cheerfulness, and an excellent sense of humor. She could recite poems and songs she'd learned many decades before, and she always had kind, uplifting words to share. She was perhaps one of the most vibrant and youngest at heart individuals I've ever met. Maureen used to tell me that when she died and went to "the other side" she hoped she'd be able to land the job of greeter, so that she could help welcome folks, put them at ease, and direct them to wherever they needed to go. I really hope that when I die Maureen will be there to help me get my bearings. What a sweet way to start a beautiful new life!