

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*This is How I Wanted It: Pauline Chen, a surgeon, learns what it means to take care of somebody. Pauline's latest book is Final Exam: A Surgeon's Reflections.*

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi everybody. This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. What does it mean to you to take care of somebody? I asked Pauline Chen that question a few weeks ago. She's a surgeon in the Boston area who's been thinking and writing a lot about what being a good doctor really means. Here's some of what she said to me in today's Morning Story, *This is How I Wanted It*.

### **Pauline Chen:**

Can I tell you a story? I was taking care of a gentleman, Frank, a retired cop from Connecticut, not too far from where I grew up. [somber woodwind music starts, playing under entire narrative] I was living in California at the time, and I was pretty homesick. He had lost his wife and had moved to the West Coast to be with his three grown children. And so he was homesick as well. We'd talk about New England autumns; we'd talk about tubing on the Farmington River; we'd talk about ... this yearly celebration in my hometown called the Shad Derby, which celebrates fish that have come home. [laughs] I think in part he reminded me of my childhood. A kid enchanted by the idea that here was a profession where you could go home at night and feel like you've helped somebody - a doctor who did the best by her patients.

He had a tumor, a liver tumor. He also had a terrible jaundice, and what happens when you are that jaundiced, if you take out some of the liver, your chances of liver failure, at least in this gentleman's case, are higher than normal. And I remember this man saying, "I understand. But this is the way I want it." We went ahead with the surgery. About three days after his operation, his liver numbers began to rise. His liver was in fact failing. He became groggier, his eyes looking through a fog at the rest of us. And his breath changed. It's something that happens in liver failure. It actually becomes sort of sweet.

One day he pulled me aside. It was on one of his clearer days and he said, "So Doc, how am I doing?" I knew that he would die. But, I said, "We need to try to nurse you back." He knew what was happening. Once again he said, "Doc, you tried your best. This is how I wanted it." He died a few days later. And I remember, I was in the operating room I think when he died and so as soon as I was done, I went over to his room. And it was so still, you could hear, you could hear the buzz of the fluorescent lights, and I could hear my own breathing. And Frank was lying there. I remember realizing what I had to do. I had to listen to his heart, listen to his breathing to confirm that there was no, you know, no spontaneous heartbeats, no spontaneous breathing,

and I couldn't bring myself to do it. And I just sat there, pulled up a chair, just sat next to him. And I looked at those hands again. You know, he had one of these handshakes that would, when he took your hand and shook it, after he released it and walked away, you could still feel his hand against yours. And I touched his hands.

Death, for a lot of doctors is this terrible sense that you have failed, that in order to help somebody, you've got to cure them. I was young enough at the time that if he hadn't said it – "This is how I wanted it," I think it would have, it would have been absolutely devastating for me. To be honest, I still struggle with it, not to be afraid, to thank the dying for, for all that they're giving you. Frank, in one of the last lucid moments of his life, was able to thank me for taking care of him. Frank was taking care of me. Frank, thank you.

**Tony Kahn:**

That was Pauline Chen with today's Morning Story, *This is How I Wanted It*. I'm here in the studio with Gary Mott.

**Gary Mott:**

One thing about Pauline that really impressed me, she sent both of us a handwritten card ...

**Tony Kahn:**

She did.

**Gary Mott:**

... thanking us for our hospitality and, whatever. Well, I basically met her out in the lobby, [Tony murmurs in agreement] and escorted her back here. I spent maybe a total of, I don't know, two, three minutes with her, but yet she cared enough to acknowledge. I put that card that Pauline gave me on my board.

**Tony Kahn:**

Some of the most moving stories that we've heard from doctors have been from surgeons.

**Gary Mott:**

Surgeons like Sherwin Nuland ...

**Tony Kahn:**

Sherwin Nuland.

**Gary Mott:**

... who, *I Have My Eye On You*, is on our archive page.

**Tony Kahn:**

One of the points that he made, and I think it's what Pauline is also getting at, is that to be treated well, is to be recognized by the other person. Sherwin talked about the fact that there was a guy who saved his life because he knew Sherwin underneath all of his depression.

**Gary Mott:**  
That's right.

**Tony Kahn:**  
And he said that, you know, the woman that he ended up marrying was someone who knew him in both his good times and his bad times. Pauline, you know, is saying, taking care of somebody is a relationship.

**Gary Mott:**  
That's right.

**Tony Kahn:**  
Both of you have to feel that you can say "thank you" to the other for what you've done. I so love her honesty when she says, you know, "I'm not completely there yet."  
[music resumes] We'll have a link to information about her book, *Final Exam* on our website and on the RSS feed as well, right Gar?

**Gary Mott:**  
We will.

**Tony Kahn:**  
Just make sure to keep on checking in on our website where things are changing all the time.

**Gary Mott:**  
<[wgbh.org/morningstories](http://wgbh.org/morningstories)> There's a link to Georgia's Blog, growing.

**Tony Kahn:**  
Good place to really meet other people who are enjoying *Morning Stories* and we'll be back with another one real soon. Mr. Mott, take care.

**Gary Mott:**  
Thank you.

[Music plays alone, then ends.]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by Susan MacLeod