

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

StoryCorps: David Isay of StoryCorps talks with Tony Kahn about the power of telling stories, and of the love in listening.

Tony Kahn:

Hi, everybody. This is Tony Kahn, producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston.

Daughter's Voice:

Is there anything that you've never told me, but want to tell me now?

Tony Kahn:

Some questions, like this one from a daughter to her mother can take a whole lifetime to ask, and the answers can be well worth the wait.

Mother's Voice:

When we first came here we went through a lot of things like not eating. For six months your father lost his job, and, but we never told you that.

Daughter's Voice:

I do remember a lot of bean tacos. [both laugh]

Mother's Voice:

I didn't want to tell you why. I was so busy going to school too, that I guess I neglected you a little bit.

Daughter's Voice:

Watching you go to school with two kids and trying to make ends meet, that was the biggest inspiration for me to finish college. I thought there is nothing that could stand in my way, that didn't stand in yours, more. And I feel like anything I do from here on now is OK because I have already achieved my dream.

Tony Kahn:

For five years now people close enough to each other to ask and answer questions like that have been gathering in StoryCorps booths across the country. Each conversation is recorded on a free CD for them to share, and each is preserved at the Library of Congress. The founder of the project is Dave Isay

David Isay:

StoryCorps is two people in a booth, looking each other in the eyes and telling them that they love one another by listening to their stories. Stories that resonate with yourself and resonate with your own life. [Tony murmurs in assent.] It's about getting people to listen to each other. It's especially when dealing with people who hadn't necessarily been listened to.

First Male Voice:

We're at the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, Oregon. I'm forty-nine years old; I've been here twenty-one, almost twenty-one years for drug-related robbery.

Second Male Voice:

I'm thirty-nine years old; I've got double consecutive life without the possibility of parole, aggravated murder. My little boy come in here, you know, "Daddy please come home, for just a little while." My daughter, she said to her mama, "Dad must not really love us; if he did he wouldn't, he wouldn't have left us out here like that." My wife, she's raised those kids for eleven years by herself, she's a hero. That's an incredible human being, right there.

First Male Voice:

That's the way I feel about Nettie. That's my wife; we met in here in 1990, over telephone. We've been together ever since. I seriously believe if it wasn't for her, I'd probably gave up a long time ago, and done something really horrendous in here. Waking up, looking at them bars...

Second Male Voice:

Just things people take for granted, I would love to mow the lawn, you know.

First Male Voice:

When the trucks come in, you know, they bring in, like, the trash truck and all that, the smell of the exhaust, most people don't want to smell that - I try to get a nose full of it because it brings back memories of being out on the streets. Then, if you really think about, that is sorry, I mean, that's the highlight of your day, getting a nose-full of exhaust? [other man laughs]

Second Male Voice:

Think you'll ever get out?

David Isay:

When those moments happen, for me it's almost like you can see, kind of sparks coming out of the mouth of the person who is talking, it's like it, it rises to this level of just electricity. [Tony laughs heartily.]

Tony Kahn:

I love that...

David Isay:

But you know what I mean; that, it's just electric. It's funny, I've never had this conversation before, but when you really get into a conversation that's, that's working, it's almost like there's kind of a beam connecting you, it's like a, you know, a Star Trek kind of thing, you're like melded into that other person. [Tony murmurs assent; Dave chuckles throughout] And I think arrogantly I imagined that without me in the room, there wouldn't be kind of great stories coming out, and I was, you know, hit on the head with a baseball bat two days after the launch of StoryCorps, and it was dead wrong – my presence in the room had nothing to do with it.

Male Voice:

She was the only person I knew that had more power than my grandmother.

Female Voice:

She wasn't a mean person, she was stern; she meant exactly what she said.

Male Voice:

Right.

Female Voice:

In fact she was our Sunday School teacher. The only thing that would keep you from going to Sunday School: you had to have one foot on a banana peel and the other in the grave!

Male Voice:

Absolutely.

Female Voice:

That's the -- One of the things that you prayed for when you went in you went into Miz Devine's class was "Lord, please let me get old enough to get out of this class!" [They laugh here and throughout their segment.]

Male Voice:

Miz Devine made me walk two blocks in my pajamas and my tennis shoes. I had to sit in church with my friends doing Sunday School in my pajamas and my tennis shoes. I'm gonna tell you, Sher, I never lied again. But you know what? That's the kind of stuff that we got, growing up, and, and, and I'll never forget that.

David Isay:

We have facilitators, someone who is going to make you feel calm, and we built the booth, you know the lights are low, it's a very intimate space, and the very clear message that it is about honoring someone in your life, by asking them about their lives, by listening to them, I think makes people comfortable.

[Background light guitar music]

Grandson's Voice:

Throughout my life, you've been a source of inspiration for me, Grandpa –

Grandpa's Voice:

Oh, thank you, Seth.

Grandson's Voice:

– but I think the biggest thing that you did was the dedication that I saw you give to Grandma, in those last like seven or eight years that she had Alzheimer's, especially for someone like me, a child of divorce, who, you know, I've never really been given a great example of a very strong relationship. That's the biggest thing that you've brought to me.

Grandpa's Voice:

Never for a minute did I ever think, "God, when is this going to be over?" I never ever thought that and since she's died and I've kind of been floundering and trying to figure out what to do with the rest of my life, I find this period to be much more unsatisfactory than all those years of caring for her, so I guess I did have true love for her.

Grandson's Voice:

I think that's, that's what was so remarkable about it, for me.

[Guitar music fades]

Tony Kahn:

I remember once talking to a young lady; she must have been sixteen years old. I asked, "If you had absolute power to make one particular thing happen, that you think would make the world at least for a little while a more peaceful place, what would it be?" And without hesitation she said it would be a pill that everybody would have to take that for three days would make them feel what it's like to be the other guy. You know, how much bigger you really are in the presence of another person, and how much deeper you go.

David Isay:

Absolutely, that's the power of, of, of, of story to me, to kind of be that person for a moment and, and have a much deeper understanding of how much we share in common.

[Background guitar music]

Tony Kahn:

Each Friday morning here in the States a three or four minute edit is made of one of these forty-five minute conversations and presented on NPR's *Morning Edition*. Short as they are, each of these stories is like the tip of a mountain that stretches to heaven or to hell.

Male Voice:

The Capitol Dome was superimposed on her angry face. Anger that I would have the temerity to ask to buy a ticket to a movie. And I just walked the streets crying all night. My country could draft me, force me to fight a war, but you're not a good enough citizen to be able to come to a movie. Without any exception, it is the most painful recollection of anything that has ever happened to me that I have.

David Isay:

It's a very, very simple idea, it's not rocket-science; it's two people in a booth with a third person there to help with the equipment in a quiet room talking to each other.

Tony Kahn:

Why did it take so long for that to happen?

David Isay:

[Laughs] I think it took having someone who's a total nut, who insists that this thing must happen. You know, we have done about 17,000 interviews with about 33,000 participants, and I don't think there has been a bad experience in the bunch.

Tony Kahn:

How many of these stories do you get to hear yourself, Dave?

David Isay:

None. I mean I'll probably hear excerpts of two stories a week and they're totally varied and hopefully surprising every week.

Male Voice:

I remember one woman in particular, a senior, who had gotten on my bus. I said, "Are you OK?" She said, "I don't know what restaurant I'm meeting my friends." I said, "You sit on the bus, I'll run in and check each restaurant." The very, very last one on the left, I went in and I said, "There's a lady in the bus, she's not sure of the restaurant..." and I saw a whole bunch of other seniors there and they said, "It's probably her!" So I ran back to the bus, I said, "Oh sweetie, your restaurant is right here" and I said, "No, no, don't move" and I grabbed her hand. I remember my right hand grabbed her right hand - I wanted her to feel special like it was a limousine - it's a bus (!) and she said, "Today is the best day of my life." Just because I helped her off the bus, and I never forgot that woman. [Voice expresses tearful emotion.]

Tony Kahn:

Fifty of those 17,000 conversations have been edited into a book called *Listening is An Act of Love*, an additional opportunity to dwell not just on the words exchanged between these people but on things left unspoken between the lines.

Tony Kahn:

There was a moment in one of the stories - I want to read it to you. It, it went right to my heart. It's on page 137 and it's part of a conversation that's going on between a woman named Cindy and a man named Curtis:

Curtis says, "I knew that you were good for me when you said one day that we were just two tortured mutts. That was the day I knew that I wanted to marry you."

Cindy says, "That's so sad..."

Curtis says, "But that's exactly how I feel - I feel like a tortured mutt, so I knew if you were a tortured mutt and I was a tortured mutt, that we could probably give each other love."

David Isay:

It's good stuff!

Tony Kahn:

Was there a similar moment like that for you, in any of these stories?

David Isay:

I think that George Kaywood story. There's something about that story that, that really sticks with me. The daughter who brings her dad to the booth in Los Angeles, to have a conversation with him. And this conversation unfolds which is, it's just incredibly intimate. She asks him about his father's suicide. This guy George Kaywood's father took George's gun when George was thirteen and killed himself. And he says that no one has ever asked me about this, until today until this moment.

George's Daughter:

You were such a wonderful loving father to us.

George:

You have not breathed a breath, Gina – you and your sisters – when you weren't the most important thing in my life.

George's Daughter:

Sometimes when you did say no, I could bat my eyelashes at you and get you to change your mind!

George:

It still works! Each of the four girls had their own technique; you know yours was those brown eyes.

George's Daughter [imitating a girlish plea]:

Please, Dad?

George:

Well, see? I'm melting on the spot! [laughs]

George's Daughter:

[tearfully] You know, I think one of the things that my sisters and I have always felt is that you are a great, great man, and I hope that somehow this interview today brings you the honor that I think you deserve.

George:

I wouldn't trade this for every accolade in the whole world you know. I love you, honey.

George's Daughter:

I love you, too.

David Isay:

These stories, you know, just pull you right back and remind you what it's all about. An opportunity to just stop and look a loved one in the eye, listen to them and tell them what they meant to you.

Tony Kahn:

Thanks

David Isay:

Yeah, thank you Tony

Tony Kahn:

Your work means a lot to me.

David Isay:

Thank you, same here. This was fantastic. *Morning Stories* is absolutely terrific – you need that in writing ?! [laughs]

Tony Kahn:

That was Dave Isay with today's *Morning Story, StoryCorps*. Gary Mott, any final words?

Gary Mott:

Check us out on the web <wgbh.org/morningstories> and please, please get in touch. <morningstories@wgbh.org>

Tony Kahn:

See you soon; take care.

[Guitar music continues and fades]

End of Recording

Transcribed by David Keight, England.

Note from Liz:

I've heard these excerpts in various places, and have not ceased being moved by them, despite repeated hearings. What a precious gift StoryCorps is – both to those participating and those of us who listen to (or read) them!