

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

My Brother, The Doctor: Dr. Jim Kahn says there's more than one way to listen to a patient's heart. Also, some sad news . . .

Tony Kahn:

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

From the time that he was nine years old, my older brother Jim wanted to be a doctor... at least, that's what he said. I thought of him as a kind of explorer, leading the way in our boyhood adventures, always scouting out the terrain, ready to take the first blow.

He still carries a scar, down his leg, from hidden barbed wire in a ravine that we were stomping through one day as kids, that I feel was meant for me.

When Jim did become a doctor, he stayed an explorer. For over thirty years, he tried out just about every kind of medicine there is, from the Public Health Corps, to running a hospital emergency ward, an alcohol detoxification unit, serving as an infectious diseases specialist, hiring on as the traveling doc on an island off the shores of Massachusetts, running a private practice out of his own home, and helping develop a new antibiotic for a drug company.

When he retired a few months ago, I called him up to see how he was doing, and in the lull between his travels through medicine and whatever adventure comes up next for him, what kind of treasures he found along the way.

We call today's Morning Story *My Brother, the Doctor*.

[Piano in the background starts playing a classical piece, which continues softly beneath Jim's voice.]

Jim Kahn:

I did keep a card file, a Rolodex with all my patients, and I ... every now and then, I'd just spin it and remember people. I used to spend a full hour with every patient – I never saw more than eight or twelve patients a day. Go through a complete examination – head to toe – and then sit down and talk. And I began to realize (and it was gradual) my patients would almost never call over the weekend or at night. Guys would say "You know, you didn't have any problems when I covered you Jim, nobody called in, or they said they'd wait to see you in the office Monday."

Geez, I haven't thought about, about these people in years. There was a man with a very severe muscular degenerative disease, totally dependent on his wife to help him get in and out of the car, in and out of chairs, totally dedicated to each other, and I just wanted to be there for this family; I just admired them tremendously. I was always glad to see them.

Oh, there were many others. There were some very odd people, who were constantly fighting with each other. For some reason, I just felt I ought to be part of that struggle.... I don't know why.

A couple, he was, must have been sixty, had a crew cut, as if he were trying to be a tough kid from his youth, back in the fifties. His wife was this big rosy-cheeked New Hampshire, backwoods girl – always laughing, always pleasant – twice his size. I don't know ... I always looked forward when they were going to be in the office...

And another of my neighbors ... she had severe problems with alcohol abuse and smoking, depression ... kids constantly in trouble with the law. I never liked giving mood-altering drugs – for her I did it. [laughs] She couldn't make it alone; that was clear.

People that for one reason or another, just, they trusted me ... and I trusted them. There were many a patient encounter when I would reflect afterwards that, "Hmmm! I think I got more out of that meeting that they did. How about that?"

I never called anybody up and said, "Hey, I want to thank you for coming in today. You made my life fuller or richer." I, I'd like to believe I could say that; I don't think I ever did, Tony.

The, the one that always comes to mind is that young girl (I, I still think about her today, twenty five, thirty years later) ... very beautiful young girl, just angelic radiance about her. Very open ... just, I don't know, something cherubic about her.... [piano builds in the background, playing slow, delicate piece] And her husband, who was very attached to her.... And when she died, I was away; I was on vacation, and a specialist took care of her, ah, when she died. I always wished that I were strong enough to have been there and helped her through that.

I, I, I blame myself a lot for the feelings I had of relief that she died when I wasn't there. I'd like to have that over again, you know? But I've never forgotten that moment. And I always thought that's something I should have handled in a different way.... I shouldn't have run away from that.

[Long pause, as the piano continues...]

When you hold back because you can't control the situation, you deny yourself the chance to learn the right way to do it for people. And medical school does not give you instructions like that; you just have to start getting out there and being vulnerable and let it happen, and then you learn!

You can't really learn about people from textbooks. Don't be afraid to get to know the person, and if you want to be helpful to them, and brighten your own life, pay attention to the person, even more than the disease.

I think the most good I ever did for other people, was helping them understand the circumstances of their life. The disease is, is not who they are ... to remind them that they mattered. [chuckles]

[Piano piece draws to a close.]

Tony Kahn:

Jim Kahn, M.D, with today's *Morning Story, My Brother, The Doctor*. And I'm here in the listening room, with Gary Mott.

Gary Mott:

Sounds like he's had a rewarding career.

Tony Kahn:

Often we would be living together in the same city. He would say (while he was in medical school, for instance, or as a resident or an intern in a hospital), "Come on over; spend the night with me." And I would have a chance to see what it was like to be a doctor, at that particular point in his career. So, thanks to him, I've seen people at their best, and at their worst. He's just been a great older brother. He, he continues to be - now he's leading the way into retirement [they chuckle together].

Gary Mott:

I have a younger brother, who I'm very close to... very close.

Tony Kahn:

Have you learned something from your younger brother about what it is to be a younger brother?

Gary Mott:

I think he looks up to me from the standpoint of my stability, the choices I've made in my life and career. He looks to those as really something to emulate.

Tony Kahn:

One of the things that I know that I can do for my older brother, I could tell him when he had his mind made up, even when he didn't know it. You know, at difficult choices that he might have to make, like where he was going to go to medical school, whether he was going to change careers. I would be able to say, "You know, Jim, you already have your mind made up to do this." And he'd say "You think so?" I'd say "Well yeah, I'm pretty sure, aren't you?" He'd say "Yup, maybe you're right."

Gary Mott:

You know, this is a reminder, Tony, your brother and my uncle...

Tony Kahn:

Yes, right...

Gary Mott:

You know... worked together back in the, I don't know, Fifties...

Tony Kahn:

Right...

Gary Mott:

...in Brazil. So you and I are forever tied by that link.

Tony Kahn:

Yeah... It's, it's a nice reminder when I sit here with you, what a small world it is, and how, how many different worlds we can live in, also, at the same time. I'm old enough to be your father, and yet, I'm a younger brother. You're younger than I am but you're an older brother. They're so many different ways in which we've seen life from very close, but maybe opposite, sides.

Gary Mott:

It's, it's all great fodder for the podcast, over the years.

Tony Kahn:

And apparently some people agree. We got some email, in fact some of it very close to home. Well, not geographically, Kate lives in Italy. She's married to a man from Florence ... a Florentine ... or Florentinian ...

Gary Mott:

Florentian ...

Tony Kahn:

[Chuckling] Florentian. Forgive us Kate. I'm sure you'll tell us what the proper term is. But close to home in the sense that she is one of the transcribers, that

incredible group of people who've made all of our podcasts in our archive available.

Gary Mott:

Kate writes: "During a recent flight over the Atlantic, towards the United States, I was listening to a *Morning Story* – in fact, I was transcribing it at 35,000 feet. At a certain beautiful point in the story, I paused and shifted my eyes from my laptop screen and looked around the darkened cabin. I wanted others to share in the joy I was feeling then. I thought, 'I wonder if anyone else is listening to a *Morning Story* up here?' Most people were disconnected with each other and just fixed to the mini-screens embedded in the seat in front of them, letting the stream of pretty poor popular entertainment numb them from thinking about the long flight.

I wanted to get up and ask if I could plug my saved *Morning Stories* episodes into the in-flight audio options, thinking how pleasant the long flight would be if passengers were listening to (or now reading) *Morning Stories*! People would turn to each other, share their thoughts about the stories, exchange their own.

For me, the image is sort of a surreal one, but one of hope – a group of perfect strangers, in a swiftly moving cabin high in the sky (that common space where there are no borders) in tune with both the world's many special voices and with each other!"

Thank you, Kate.

Tony Kahn:

Thanks, Kate.

Gary Mott:

So Tony, I understand that, that we have a little bit of news to, ah...

Tony Kahn:

Yeah, yeah...

Gary Mott:

... impart on our listeners...

Tony Kahn:

I'm a little reluctant because it's sad news, but here it goes. *Morning Stories* is coming to an end, by the end of this August, 2008 ... which is also the end of WGBH's fiscal year. The stories that all of you've told us are priceless, and they will remain available, thanks to the Internet, for a long time, but the costs of doing another year of *Morning Stories* here at WGBH are considerable and the

money just isn't there. Personally, there is really no way of describing how much I'm going to miss listening to and, and producing your stories – and harassing Gary Mott every week.

Gary Mott:

I have a feeling that's not going to end.

Tony Kahn:

[Chuckles] And also, we'd like you to share some news with us, if you don't mind, maybe, of the, of the journeys that you've taken, and the treasures that you've found, in the course of the last four years that we've been around.

Gary Mott:

Tony, it's been a great ride ... continues to be a great ride. But who knows what's next? 'Course, our website... go there, listen... <wgbh.org/morningstories>... [piano returns, softly in the background] and as I always say, please get in touch: <morningstories@wgbh.org>.

Tony Kahn:

And, for at least a little while, we'll be back soon with another *Morning Story*, so take care, bye-bye.

[Piano continues in a contemplative mood before fading out.]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Dan Snyder

Notes from transcriber:

I was carefully working my way through the transcription of this piece, listening closely to every syllable you said, as your voices poured like molasses from my headphones... (software slows your voices to about 1/2-speed so I have a chance of keeping up with you)... when I realized that you're talking about... me! Well, the Transcriber's Club... this informal collection of keyboarding lovers of first-person stories who are taking turns transcribing Morning Stories... It felt so good to hear your appreciation of our efforts, that I wanted to turn the tables, and tell you what a joy it is to be a part, if only a small part, of the *Morning Stories* family you've created. As I sit by the radio, I always know something special is about to happen when I hear "Hi, everybody, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. "

Thanks.

Notes from Liz:

The treasures I've found in *Morning Stories* includes not only the stories, and the post-story discussions by Tony and Gary, but each individual in the Transcribers Club – such special people, all over the globe. The thought that they are undoubtedly representative of all the listeners to the show reminds me of the good inherent in most people, and makes me so glad to be a member of the community of humankind. *Morning Stories* has made community for so many of us – if we can't find a way to continue it beyond August, many more than the twelve people who transcribe for the show will miss being members of that community.

If I weren't commenting first and foremost on the sad news, I'd be telling you how much I wish I had a doctor like Tony's brother. I like my physicians here, but they are forced by the present medical compensation structure to limit their time with each patient to so brief a visit that I often find myself waiting six months to see someone who can spend only ten minutes with me. Our cats have a veterinarian who takes a full, concentrated half-hour with them, and I have often wished she would take over my medical care <grin>! Tony, you are so fortunate to have a brother who can keep an eye on your family's medical needs.