

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*There Goes Me Someday*: Nancy Cahners looks for eye-contact in the darkness of Alzheimer's.

### **Tony Kahn:**

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

My mother died at age 99. She remembered little of her long past and when I went to see her, she didn't know me by name, but what was left was priceless to me - the sweet nature she had, which had lain hidden all the time that I was growing up, by her anxieties. As her worries disappeared, I saw who she was and how much I loved her. When she died it was, as they often say, "a blessing." But the fact that she did linger was, in some way, a blessing for me.

No one is more familiar with the contradictions that come from taking care of the very old than today's storyteller, Nancy Cahners. Nancy is a chaplain. She's been with us before on *Morning Stories* and each time her look at her own life and her own work leaves me a little richer. We call her *Morning Story*, *There Goes Me Someday*.

### **Nancy Cahners:**

I didn't want to do work with elderly. And I didn't want to work in long-term care. But that's where the training was. Older folks. Folks who have outlived their lives when their families are busy with their current lives. Folks who don't have the cognitive stuff and it's not possible to reassure them, or to give them what they need.

I found myself feeling very sleepy when I'd hear their stories. I could be moved to tears very easily. This woman, her head was always face down on the table and she pulled her hair and she was scary. I told myself, "Talk to her, Nancy" and so I ... uh ... touched her and she looked up and from this pile of scariness she spoke. And I could tell from the few words she was able to say that she was a cultivated lady. And she was from Philadelphia. And she had lived an elegant life. She reminded me of my mother, who's in this circumstance. She said, "You're, you're a dear girl." And I thought to myself, you know, [voice begins to break with emotion] looking in this face, "I'm hardly a girl, but I'm glad somebody still thinks so." And I wish mother could say those words.

I, I later read that one of the signals of burnout is when you tell yourself "by working harder you'll get over it." If I were better at this, I wouldn't have these strong reactions. Their reality was not something I could change.

[Singing begins - *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'o'lam...* continues under narration]

I continue to work with the elderly. On Friday afternoons I sing, with a group of people, the shabbat blessings.

[Singing ends - ...*ner shel Shabbat*... then begins a new prayer]

There was a woman who couldn't complete a sentence without losing her thought, but she had a way of extending her hands to other members of the group and holding their hands for a hello. And it was such a beautiful thing to observe, the joy she was having, the moment of joy that exists, maybe in a long stretch of loneliness. Hmmm.

Sometimes folks become very fearful. If you go up to someone and smile at them, you observe their faces just brighten and be transformed. [music begins to play underneath] And I often search their faces for "what did you look like when you were younger?" but it doesn't matter. It's just who they are at that split second, for that moment. Everybody is the universal mother, the universal sister, the universal aunt. It's lovely [she laughs].

There was a king who had a crazy son and the son liked to sit naked under the table and...uh...pretend he was a dog. Great doctors, healers, were summoned but no one could help the son. [music swells, then fades again] Finally, a great rabbi showed up and got under the table with the prince, and bit by bit, under the table, was able to guide the prince.

To join with the afflicted one. Maybe this is what heaven is.

[Music gradually fades]

**Tony Kahn:**

That was Nancy Cahners with today's morning story, *There Goes Me Someday*. I'm here in the listening room at WGBH with Gary Mott.

**Gary Mott:**

You know, a couple of weeks ago, I was in San Antonio, where I grew up, and my mother does this very thing. She goes to an Alzheimer's home, a facility, and she sings and prays with the residents there. I went with her and I shook hands with a lady that I remember from my youth. She was in a wheelchair and I said "Ethel," you know, "so nice to see you." And she just looked at me and laughs. And her daughter said "She doesn't talk; she just laughs." It was all that she knew how to do.

Who knows what resonates in the mind of someone with -- in such a state. Who knows at what point the, the human part of us is no longer there.

**Tony Kahn:**

The story that Nancy told about the rabbi who joins the prince under the table? [Gary murmurs assent here and there throughout the following commentary.] Nancy told me that something in real life happened very much like that for her. She was going to see somebody in a nursing home who was so bent over that he no longer could look up. All he could see was the floor and people who walked by him assumed the worst and Nancy got this wonderful idea when she went to see him, why not sit on the floor and look up at him? And so for the first time in who knows how long this man had eye contact with another human being. There was Nancy looking up into his eyes and she said the most wonderful smile came across this guy's face. And she said, "You know, I may have done him a kindness, but he taught me an enormous lesson. You can't keep another person intact. You, you can't keep another person happy, but you certainly can treasure the, the relationship that the two of you make when you are together.

And I think this is what sustains Nancy because Nancy's got to deal with this every day. Her mother had it, will she have it?

**Gary Mott:**

On some level I do the same, because my grandfather died of Alzheimer's. You see my folks - I hate to say this - but preparing for death. They want to do whatever they can do to not put that stress on, on their children.

**Tony Kahn:**

It's always a balancing act, and I know it's a balancing act that Nancy struggles with, too.

Anyway, we just want to tell you as well that we've been hearing from you recently about the uncertain future of our favorite little podcast here and we want to thank you for your good ideas and your good wishes, so please keep both of them coming and we'll keep you posted.

**Gary Mott:**

And please go to our website, see what's new - see what's old!

**Tony Kahn:**

Maybe timeless, who knows?

**Gary Mott:**

Hey, it's all timeless, Tony. [wgbh.org/morningstories](http://wgbh.org/morningstories) and we love the e-mail. Keep it coming <[morningstories@wgbh.org](mailto:morningstories@wgbh.org)>

**Tony Kahn:**

And we'll see you soon. Take care.

[Clarinet plays klezmer tune.]

[End of recording]

*Transcribed by:* Bev Sykes <basykes@dcn.org>

Transcriber note: It seems almost kismet that this particular morning story came around when it was my turn to transcribe the next one. We lost my beloved aunt to Alzheimer's this past year. It had been so tragic to watch this bright, intelligent, witty, funny woman fade away, bit by bit, piece by piece. Her caregivers were wonderful with her and we were all so grateful for the love that they gave her and for the many kindnesses extended to her during her last days. People like Nancy are very special and make a huge difference in the world.

Note from Liz:

A moving story, beautifully told and accompanied. So many of us in the Baby Boom generation have reached the age when another generation or two are overtaking us in our centrality to "the world," and we find ourselves looking much more seriously at the very old, because "someday" for us is not as far away as it always used to seem.