A.J. JACOBS: There are tons of people backstage – producers, assistants, assistant producers – and I can’t keep straight who is who. I do notice that everyone is acting incredibly upbeat. They say things like, “Let’s keep the energy up!” and “Oh, this is so fun!”

I am not having fun.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: We all have grand ideas about things we want to accomplish in life. And A.J. Jacobs has made a living taking on some of the most unusual challenges I’ve ever heard. Whether it’s spending a year following every rule in the Bible, or personally thanking the one thousand people involved in producing his morning cup of coffee, TED speaker, writer, and self-professed human guinea pig, A.J. loves nothing more than embarking on these epic challenges – and when they’re done, telling the world about what he’s learnt.

And the story A.J. will tell us today is of the time he came face to face with the modern media deity that is Oprah Winfrey, and the bold step he took to connect with her.

In this series, we blend immersive, first-person stories with mindfulness prompts to help you recharge at any time of the day. I’m Rohan, and I’ll be your guide for Meditative Story. From time to time, you’ll hear me come in with a brief prompt. Some may work really well for you. Others, perhaps not so much. That’s okay. Just stay inside the story. That’s all you need to do to feel its effect, quieting your mind.

The body relaxed. The body breathing. Your senses open. Your mind open. Meeting the world.

JACOBS: I wrote my first book several years ago. The book chronicles the year I spent reading the entire Encyclopedia Britannica and trying to learn everything in the world. It’s the Iron Man Triathlon for nerds. This was back when you could still get printed encyclopedias with leather covers, before Wikipedia took over.

So I read the encyclopedia from A to Z, all 33,000 pages. And I did learn a lot – maybe too much. I learned about the entire history of Portuguese literature. I learned that the Bayer aspirin company patented heroin as a cough suppressant. I learned that opossums have 13 nipples. You know, important useful information. Information that, to this day, I can’t seem to get out of my brain.

But one thing I did not learn from reading the encyclopedia was how to deal with my self-doubt and anxiety. That lesson would come several months after the book was published, during one of the strangest and most stressful days of my life.
The saga begins when I’m working in my living room in my New York apartment. My phone rings. It’s a TV producer named Jen. She works for a show I might have heard of: “The Oprah Winfrey Show.”

“Yes,” I say. “I have, indeed, heard of it.”

They’re considering having me as a guest on the show. Would I be open to that?

“Yes,” I say. “I would be open to that.” Extremely open.

At this point, my palms are sweaty. My heart is racing as fast as the heart of a ruby-throated hummingbird’s, which I happen to know from the encyclopedia beats at 1,200 times per minute.

You have to understand: This was at the height of Oprah mania. Oprah had recently given Pontiac G6s to everyone in her studio audience. Her show was seen by 7 million people every day. And in book publishing her name was mentioned in hushed tones, half reverential, half fearful, like a Spaniard fifty years ago might talk about Francisco Franco.

Oprah could single handedly make a writer’s career, launch them onto the bestseller list. I had gotten some decent publicity when my book came out, but this would be another league. It’d be like going from regional theater to Broadway.

Jen tells me she’s working on an episode about “burning questions.” The idea is that Oprah would interview an expert who would answer common but baffling questions like “Why do birds sing?”

The producers are considering having me be the expert. The catch is Oprah hasn’t yet agreed to the topic or to me as the guest. We need to convince her. Jen asks, Can I write up a memo with a bunch of fun facts?

The next three days, I feverishly scour the encyclopedia for the best trivia and write up a long memo: Oysters are gender fluid. They can change sex from male to female and back to male again several times in a lifetime. I include dozens of other non-oyster related facts. And I send off the email.

The next day Jen replies: “These are a good start. But could you send more examples?”

So one of my facts is: “Why do dogs stick their heads out of car windows? Scientists think it’s because the rushing air provides them with a tidal wave of odors.” I send my email off again.

A day later Jen replies. “No decision yet,” she says. “I’m fighting for you.”

Oof. That doesn’t sound good. I want to be fought over, not for. “Also,” Jen adds, “Can you send more facts?”

For more than a week, getting on Oprah is my full-time job. And the harder I work, the more I want to be on the show. My brain is telling me, “This is it. If you get on Oprah, it will fill the void in your soul. It’ll show all the doubters you’ve achieved something. Remember that sixth grade bully who made fun of your buck teeth? He’ll eat his words.”

At least that’s what I’m telling myself sometimes. Other times, I’m annoyed at myself for caring so much. I try to talk myself out of it. Why should my self-esteem hinge on a daytime TV show appearance? Take the long view, I remind myself. This will all be forgotten in 100 years.

And in a few billion years, the universe will reach maximum entropy, run out of energy, and everything will be lifeless randomly floating sub-atomic particles. The bosons and fermions? They won’t care if I was on “The Oprah Winfrey Show.”

**GUNATILLAKE:** Take a moment. What’s a worry that’s on your mind right now? What happens if you take the long view, and see your worry against the cosmic scale of things? Does it help?

**JACOBS:** I get the call. I’m in! Next week I’ll be flown to Chicago to tape “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” I’m equal parts exhilarated and terrified. I forget about the heat death of the universe. I think only of the 7 million viewers, enough to fill 150 Yankee stadiums. What if all of them buy my book? Or what if all of them watch me torpedo my career by flubbing my lines?

On the plane to Chicago, I practice my facts nonstop. I mutter to myself about red barns and fat cells, eliciting looks from fellow passengers. I continue repeating my facts as I check into the fancy hotel they’ve booked me in. It’s the kind of hotel with cucumber-tinged water in glass coolers.

When I’m not practicing lines, I’m debating whether or not to wear a tie onstage. On the one hand, Oprah is the queen of all media. She deserves the respect of a windsor knot. On the other hand, maybe a tie would come off as too snooty and unrelatable to the audience. Maybe I should play it cool and go casual. Like “Oh, I happened to be in the neighborhood and heard you needed an expert for your little show, so here I am in my
cargo shorts and t-shirt. No big deal.” In the end, after intensively focus-grouping the question to friends and family, I go with no tie, but yes, blazer.

After a fitful night’s sleep, I arrive at the TV studio where Oprah records her show. It’s in a nondescript warehouse-looking building. I’m escorted past the security desk, past the throngs of audience members waiting in line (mostly women, mostly in their church-worthy skirts and necklaces), and into the Green Room.

The Green Room has a couch, a large selection of croissants, and lots of photos of Oprah. Oprah with Leonardo DiCaprio, Oprah with Ben Affleck, Oprah with Nelson Mandela.

There are tons of people backstage – producers, assistants, assistant producers – and I can’t keep straight who is who. I do notice that everyone is acting incredibly upbeat. They say things like, “Let’s keep the energy up!” and “Oh, this is so fun!”

I’m not having fun. I just want to get this over with.

GUNATILLAKE: How are your energy levels? If you want to raise them, try straightening your spine if you can, opening the chest. Notice how this gentle upward motion lifts you in other ways too.

JACOBS: The producers and I go over my answers again. There’s concern about one of my fun facts, the one about how Coca-Cola used to contain cocaine. The lawyer doesn’t love that one. One of the other facts has to do with cars. I ask, should I make a reference to “You get a car! And you get a car!” The producer says no. In retrospect, that was a good call.

There’s a closed-circuit TV in the Green Room, and I watch Oprah come on stage and introduce today’s topic to her audience – her very adoring audience. They applaud at the end of almost every sentence she says. Will they be as kind to me?

I notice Oprah isn’t in quite as jolly a mood as her audience. When the cameras aren’t rolling, Oprah is all business. There’s a glitch in the teleprompter, “Let’s get this fixed, people. Come on!” she says. “We have a full day.” I realize, she didn’t become the most powerful woman on Earth by being a pushover.

I retreat into the Green Room’s bathroom, close the door, and say my lines into the mirror. “A.J.! A.J.!” I hear one of the producers calling with a bit of panic in the voice.

My segment is next. During a commercial break, the producer escorts me down a hallway and onto the stage. The segment is about to start.
I sit back in the black leather chair. I feel the hot lights. I sense the audience’s eyes on me, but I don’t turn my head, hoping to tune them out. In the chair facing me is Oprah Winfrey. She’s wearing a white sweater, a brown plaid skirt, and thigh-high beige boots, which she earlier told the audience were highly uncomfortable.

My mouth is as dry as the Atacama Desert in Peru (annual rainfall less than a millimeter). Oprah looks at me. She can tell I’m anxious. “You got this,” she says – which is a lovely and generous thing to say, and which makes me more nervous since I don’t want to let her down or annoy her.

And, we’re live.

Oprah introduces me and starts in on the burning questions: “What is dust?” she says.

“It’s everything but the kitchen sink,” I say. “It’s got bits of clothing, and plant matter and insect parts and lots of human skin. Humans shed one pound of skin a year.”

“Ok,” says Oprah.

It was a flat “ok,” not an enthusiastic “OK!” It was an “ok” that translated to “that’s barely interesting.”

I answer a couple of other questions like, where does fat go when you lose weight? (You breathe and pee it out). I’m trying to keep the energy up, as instructed, but I’m also on autopilot. I’m saying the lines I’ve said so many times before. We cut to commercial.

I do a self-assessment. How’s it going? Well, it’s going “ok.” I haven’t embarrassed myself, but I haven’t hit a home run by any means. Oprah and I haven’t bonded. She seems aloof, distracted, unengaged. There’s no hugging. Oprah and I sit awkwardly onstage. Oprah looking off into the distance. She’s humming: Ba-babb, bababb.

Wait, she’s humming? Humming! At that moment, I decided to do something bold and terrifying. Before I tell you what that is, I need to back up for a second to give you the context.

At the start of the show, Oprah invited the audience to ask burning questions about Oprah herself. The most memorable question was “Oprah, do you ever fart during a show?”

And Oprah replied that yes, she sometimes does fart during the show. And what she does is, she hums a tune to cover it up. She sings a little song.
So there Oprah is, in front of me, during the commercial break. Humming distractedly. It is the perfect setup. Should I do it? I look at Oprah and wave my hand in front of my nose as if to clear away an odor.

“Ooof Oprah!” I say. “That was silent but deadly!”

I can’t believe I’m saying the words when they come out of my mouth. But I’ve decided to act as if I’m bold. I consciously take on the character of someone who is confident and optimistic. I decide to treat Oprah the way I treat my friends, as a normal human being, not a deity.

Oh man, I think. This could backfire big time.

Oprah pauses for an excruciating three seconds, then bursts out laughing. It’s not the greatest joke ever. But Oprah loves it. The commercial break ends, and the interview resumes. But the tenor is different, at least it seems to me.

Oprah and I are now friends. She’s warmed up to me. She is laughing more, bantering. Finally, I’m able to relax. Miraculously, Oprah has me stay on for two extra unplanned segments.

In the end, I answered the questions factually correctly. But Oprah didn’t ask me the most important questions. Looking back, that moment was about questions that can’t be answered by the Encyclopedia Britannica, like what’s the best way to build rapport with another person quickly? When is the right time to take a risk? Should you treat famous people like human beings?

Those are the ones that will stay in my brain. An organ, by the way, that makes up only 2 percent of our body weight but uses up to 20 percent of our body’s energy. I thought you should know.

**GUNATILLAKE:** What I like about A.J.’s story is that the moment everything changes for him is when he releases the pressure. Instead of being super tight around Oprah, he lets go of the idea of her being this mythical, hyper important personality and treats her just like anyone else.

So in our short meditation together, that’s what we’re going to emphasise: releasing tension and seeing even the most intimidating people as just that, people.

A good trick for releasing tension, the kind that A.J. felt, is to pay more attention to our out-breath over the in-breath. So that’s what we’re going to start with.

With eyes open or closed, try placing as much attention as you can on the sensations of breathing as they are right now. Letting your awareness settle on the relatively subtle movements of your body as the breath comes in and out.
The easiest place to do this is by paying close attention to the feeling of the breath in the belly. And if you need some help, you can place your hand there on your belly, amplifying the sensations by feeling them in your hand.

This is simple mindfulness: Being aware of sensations while they happen. And we’re going to make it more interesting by exploring the differences between the in breath and the out breath. Can you feel that? Can you feel how actually quite different the experience of breathing in is to that of breathing out?

Breathing in. Breathing out.

Inspiration. Expiration.

In. Out.

Whatever your breath is like. Not trying to change it in any way. Just knowing it. Just being interested in it.

Now can we be even more curious and notice what the moment is like when the inbreath becomes the outbreath? Notice the transition point. A moment of fullness. A moment which actually might feel quite tense. A moment which needs its release. And the release that comes with the out-breath.

Pay particular attention to that moment. And to how the out-breath is naturally all about release, all about the letting go of pressure. Our body’s natural relaxant. So, this is a great trick to remember whenever you need to puncture some tension. Emphasising the out-breath over the in-breath. Not too bothered about the in, but making the out the most important thing. And in the doing, emphasising release.

Now, switching things up a bit. Part of what was blocking A.J. while on set in Chicago was that he was feeling intimidated. And for all the strange energy of the production, it was the presence of Oprah, such a powerful presence, that was holding him back. So he punctured that pressure by connecting with Oprah in an ordinary, even childish, way. So let’s do that too.

Bring to mind someone you’re intimidated by. It could be a work colleague, an acquaintance, a celebrity, or public figure even. The first person you think of is probably the best one to go with. There’s no right answer. Although it’s important you feel safe and comfortable bringing them to mind.

Feel a sense of their power. Of how they make you feel, maybe tight or tense. And then imagine them doing something utterly ordinary. Utterly un-intimidating. Sensing their ordinariness. The ordinariness we all share.
Unlike A.J., it’s true that we’re unlikely to come across a situation as fearsome as Oprah’s sofa. But if in our own lives, we can use his trick of puncturing worry and tension with humanity and humor, then we too can start answering some of life’s most important questions.