LINDSEY STIRLING: He gets up and paces silently around the campfire for a moment, contemplating what to share. Then his crooked, mischievous smile comes across his face. He has the complete attention of all the teenagers, pulling us away from our card games or Capture the Flag. We sit there and just listen.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Through her striking blend of violin, dance, costuming, and electronic music, Lindsey Stirling has won over fans around the world, and made herself a modern music sensation.

In today’s episode, Lindsey shares a Meditative Story about how we see our shortcomings – and if our perception of them is actually true in the first place. She owes her resilience and ability to connect with people to her father, even though he perhaps never truly recognized the impact he had on the world around him.

In this series, we blend immersive, first-person stories with mindfulness prompts to give you a deep sense of wellbeing at any time of the day. From WaitWhat and Thrive Global, this is Meditative Story. I’m Rohan, and I’ll be your guide.

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

STIRLING: I sit in the living room beside my father. I’m six years old. The morning light pours through the big windows dispersing a warm, yellow glow across the room. We sit on my blankie, me and my dad together; it’s our little cushion on the hardwood floor.

I’m cupping a bowl of Kix cereal in my hands. The sweet smell of corn fills my nostrils. I love the crunch as I heap spoonfuls into my mouth.

My father wakes up early with me on Saturday mornings, even though this is the only day he doesn’t work. This is when we have our one-on-one time. This is where he tells me his stories.

My favorite story of his is “The Buccaneers of Biscayne.” It’s about a group of pirates who sail the seas and are at battle with the British. The pirates get lost in the Bermuda Triangle, their ship is caught in a time hole, and the pirates have no idea that they have travelled forward in time, to the modern day. They commandeer a cruise ship and find the passengers on board to be very strange. The pirates rant about how “everyone on board is being taken captive.” The cruise ship guests all think the pirates are part of the entertainment. When instructed to dig up a beach for buried treasure they laugh, play along, and think it’s all part of the fun!
My Saturday morning stories with my father are sometimes pieces from movie scripts he has written and are sometimes awesome adventures from his own life. He has stories from when he narrowly escaped the revolution in Chile.

Or how as a scrawny white kid with glasses he accidentally walked into a Black Panthers meeting in the high school bathroom and somehow walked out as their friend and an honorary member of their group.

Or how he took my mom to Wendy’s on their first date, full of humor and generosity, without a dime to his name. Sometimes I find it difficult to tell which stories are real and which are made up! He is a gifted storyteller. I sit wide-eyed listening to every word.

My dad works from home in his little office. His day job is a freelance writer in advertising but he stays up late into the night, typing away at movie scripts he’s going to pitch to Hollywood studios. Some days I sit on the floor next to his computer, just laying there as he types, falling asleep to the sound of his fingers hitting the keys.

I sit with him on my blankie and think, “Oh dad, I want to live a life like you. I want to go places, I want to meet people, I want to see things.”

Listening to my father I am transported to far away places, and I too begin to dream. I didn’t realize it at the time, but he is planting seeds for me to pursue my own dreams. To imagine a life for myself beyond the ordinary. Beyond what I see everyday.

We live in LA. His dream is to become a scriptwriter but none of his plays or screenplays have been made into anything real yet. He doesn’t have the “success” that he wants, but he takes whatever work he can find. While I don’t know it at the time, we barely get by, living paycheck to paycheck. But that’s not what I see, I look at my dad and see this amazing life, filled with the most incredible stories.

But that isn’t the picture that my dad sees. He works tirelessly and work turns into a real struggle to make ends meet. While chasing his own dreams, Dad begins to notice that my sisters and I start to have our own little dreams pop into our heads. I want to play the violin. My sister wants to play the trumpet. And after years of trying to make it work, my parents decide that our LA life isn’t working. It’s time to find something else, so that they can help their kids live their dreams.

When I’m eight years old, our financial challenges force my father to let go of script writing and leave LA behind. We move to Arizona where he teaches religious studies as a seminary teacher. This is a path that he had abandoned many years ago, but finds his way back after his Hollywood dreams didn’t take shape the way he wanted.
My father never loses his love of writing and telling stories. He doesn’t stop, channeling his creative energy into a more personal audience: his children, his students, and our new community in Arizona. As I get older, the living room floor is replaced by another one of my father’s favorite spots: the campfire.

We go camping every year with families and friends. We all gather around the fire at night and the same request comes year after year: "Brother Stirling, tell us a story." He gets up and paces silently around the campfire for a moment, contemplating what to share. Then his crooked mischievous smile comes across his face. He has the complete attention of all the teenagers, pulling us away from our card games or Capture the Flag. We sit there and just listen.

It’s cold enough that we can see his booming voice turning into smoke as each word escapes his mouth into the crisp air. The only thing that breaks the silence, aside from his voice, is the crackling of the fire. You can feel the fire’s warmth, and the serene silence of the woods all around you. It’s perfect.

GUNATILLAKE: You can feel the fire’s warmth, and the serene silence of the woods all around you. It’s perfect.

STIRLING: I love the story of how one time he takes his parent's motor-home and he and his best friend go off bumming around the country. They are fresh out of college and still trying to figure out what to do with their lives. He just wants to see things and meet people. They go all around the country in the motor-home and stop wherever they please. He spends his days writing and meeting people on the streets, saying, "Hey, want to stop and talk? I got some peanut butter and jelly in my bag and we could have lunch together in the park."

That was life for him: going out, making friends, meeting people, and writing – which is funny because most of my father’s life is spent as a seminary teacher, so the two don’t seem to fit together. But that’s just my dad.

After we move to Arizona, my dad’s focus is supporting us and his students. Whether we are failing or succeeding, he pushes us forward to live our lives fully, as he did.

My sister, Jennifer, is a runner, one of the best in the state. During the summer she does preseason training where she takes off and runs for miles and miles. It’s too hot to train during the day, so late at night my dad gets into his old Buick Skylark, pulls out of our driveway, and takes his position behind Jennifer. She begins her run and he drives slowly behind her. He drives for hours so she feels supported – and doesn’t die of heatstroke! Gently guiding and pushing us from behind, never blocking our way or creating a hurdle, my dad’s faithful presence is always there.
And he drives the distance for me too, going miles and miles to and from Metropolitan Youth Symphony where I perform as a teenager. The car rattles and overheats along the way. We constantly have to pull over to fill up cups of water just to douse the radiator until it’s cool enough to drive again.

Years later, my childhood dream of performing lands me on the stage of America’s Got Talent. It doesn’t go well. On live TV I get an X, fans vote me off the show, and the judges tell me that I sound like a bunch of rats being strangled. In front of 11 million people, I have the most embarrassing moment of my life.

I am devastated. I run backstage and sob on the bathroom floor for an hour. I feel like I’ve blown the biggest moment of my life, and I can’t even describe the amount of disappointment and humiliation that I feel at that moment. Everyone I know is watching and cheering for me – only to watch me fail.

The custodians find me and tell me that I need to leave the studio. So I go out into the street to face my family. I keep thinking, “What am I going to say? They’re going to be so embarrassed for me. They traveled to be here to hopefully watch me succeed and now what?”

I see all of them walking towards me and my dad runs ahead of everybody and throws his arms around me, giving me the biggest hug. I brace myself, prepared for them to tell me that I was great when I know, I really wasn’t. But my dad just wraps his arms around me and says, “I’m so proud of you.”

I hadn’t prepared an answer for that. So I sink into his puffy coat and let the warm tears stream down my cheeks and spill onto his scarf. At that moment I realize that no matter what I do, he will always love me, he will always be proud of me because he is my biggest fan. He gives me the courage to keep going.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Rest with your image of their embrace. Can you feel the movement that Lindsey has enjoyed? The movement from devastation to determination. Whatever is here for you, let it be here.

**STIRLING:** Some years later, my father is diagnosed with cancer. It is so hard to watch him become weak and thin, to watch him struggle to put one foot in front of the other, and to push him in his wheelchair. His once animated and booming voice is scratchy and full of stutters. Eighteen months later, the cancer has spread to his brain and his mind starts to go. A lot of the things he says aren’t clear anymore. That is probably the hardest thing to watch deteriorate, his brilliant mind. Everything about him continues to fade.
At the end of his life, he writes one last series of books, and he wants so badly to get them published because he knows he is dying. That's what became important to him. It's what he cares about more than anything, his need for his stories to be heard.

When I look at my Dad I think about how I’ve heard every word of his stories. How hundreds of his students have heard his stories and have become better people for it. And how he has touched so many lives. But he doesn’t realize any of this himself – until the dream.

One morning my father wakes up from his sleep and asks me to come sit by his side. I take a seat and patiently listen as he struggles to share a dream from the previous night. At this point, it’s hard for him to stay awake, let alone speak. In the dream, a bunch of his students come into a room. As they enter, he thinks to himself, “I wish I could have taught them more.” One by one, he watches them leave. As they exit, each one stops to say, “You helped us feel loved. You taught us that no matter who we are, we are always loved.” Each student files by him imparting the same message.

As I sit at his funeral, I see a choir of hundreds of his students. They have come from everywhere. Some are current students in their teens and others are in their late thirties. They are here to sing together, to honor his memory and his legacy.

At the actual gravesite, where it’s really only the closest family and friends, people individually stand up and tell a story about him. I can't believe all the things he has done for people, the time he took to love people. I knew he’d been there for me and my siblings. But then to hear he spent hours with Ricky Lyman, for weeks, after Ricky lost his father. That he stopped by to visit brother Huber every Sunday. That his students would flood his office during his lunch hour to ask for help and advice. The stories went on and on. I remember thinking, “When did this man ever have time to do anything?”

After my father passes away I think a great deal about how his life has shaped my own.

I have learned to deal with failures by the example set by my father. Growing up, I witness his astonishing resilience when dealing with what he thinks are his shortcomings, especially failing to become a famous writer, but he continues to share his stories and touch the lives of hundreds of students. I think more important than the stories he got to share are the stories he was able to create, the stories he was able to live. He was a constant well of creation, and he devoted his life to leading from behind.

I inherit his tenacity. I realize it’s okay to go for your big dreams even if you don’t get what you want because you'll have this life of amazing stories that come from it. And on that journey, you touch people and connect with them – and this is the big adventure of life.
GUNATILLAKE: So, stories. When remembering her father, it is his stories and the power of his storytelling that first came to Lindsey’s mind. And here at Meditative Story we hear that. The whole premise of this show is that connecting with other people’s stories, beautifully told, can help connect us with ourselves and the world around us.

I loved the little detail Lindsey shared of her not always knowing whether a story her father told was made up or not. I see that in my own son, who often asks me if a character in a story “is in real life.” Answering that question isn’t always straightforward. And that’s the theme that we’re going to explore in our meditation together.

Let’s start by stopping. Noticing any residual energy and movement and thought from the story and letting it go. Breathing. Letting the body be soft, the face relaxed, gifting your shoulders permission to let go of any tension they’re holding. Breathing naturally. But perhaps paying a bit more attention to the outbreath. Enjoying its instinct to relax.

Stories. Exploring the line between those which are made up and those that are not. What is a story you tell yourself about the world? Maybe the story you tell is that the world is a scary place or a place full of opportunity. Take a moment to ask the question and recall a story you tell yourself about the world.

How true is that story right now? Your world is nothing more than the totality of what you’re experiencing in this moment. How true is your story? Breathing. Enjoying the outbreath. Ok. What is a common story you tell about yourself? When you talk to yourself about yourself, what story comes up again and again?

For me, looking deeply, it’s that when compared to other people I’ve not fulfilled my potential. What is it for you? Looking inward, sensing honestly, what story do you tell yourself about yourself? And remembering that story in your mind, how true is it really? As my son would ask, is it in real life or is it not in real life? In this moment, with the temperature on your skin like it is, with your outbreath like it is, is it in real life? Or is it just a story?

One of the skills of meditation is to hold stories lightly. To enjoy and value them but know when they are being taken so seriously that they limit us and cloud our senses. And in the spirit of Lindsey and her work, to dance with them.

Thank you.