Meditative Story Transcript – Dan Harris

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DAN HARRIS: When Bianca and I first had Alexander, I remember there being a whole tsunami of sentiment, both over email from my friends and on social media from people I didn’t know, where we were being told and exhorted to “enjoy every moment” or “cherish every moment.”

And I always wondered about that: Is this just a kind of perfunctory thing that people say or is it maybe based in some sort of remorse that they may feel about having let their kid’s childhood slip by without really taking it all in while it was happening?

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Parenting is a rollercoaster: Steep climbs. Full on free falls. Sharp turns. One moment you’re filled with doubt and worry. The next joy and delight. It just is this way.

Today’s storyteller, Dan Harris is a broadcaster and journalist, and the creator of the “10% Happier” meditation app and podcast. In the story he’s about to tell, Dan shares a candid look into his attempts to connect more with his son Alexander.

I’m Rohan, and I’ll be your guide for Meditative Story.

So right now in this moment, what can you do to really be here? To help me be as present as possible for you, I’m feeling my feet on the ground. I’m aware of the temperature of the air on my skin. I know the movement in my face as I speak. What is it for you?

Relaxing the body. Letting the body breathe. Your senses open. Your mind open. Meeting the world.

HARRIS: So things have been pretty oedipal around my house for a little while. My son Alexander is four and he’s all about his mommy right now. Their bond is beautiful and tight – but that sometimes means it’s really hard for me to break in.

Because of the nature of our respective schedules, my wife, Bianca, spends more time with Alexander. I work very funny hours. I’m employed at ABC News where I anchor “Good Morning America” on the weekends, which means I'm up at 3:45 in the morning and – once I’ve stretched, showered, and meditated – I sneak out of the apartment as quietly as possible, so as to not wake Alexander and Bianca, and then I take a quick car ride through the dark and often utterly silent city streets to the office. Those are my weekend mornings.
And then during the week, I’m one of the co-anchors of “Nightline”, which means for several nights I stay up really late to anchor that show.

Bianca is a highly trained physician but she’s not working right now. She had breast cancer a few years ago and she’s been taking a little time off. Thankfully she’s fine, but this situation does mean she spends a lot more time with Alexander than I do.

Typically, in the morning on weekdays, I walk out into the living room, disheveled, an hour into Alexander’s playtime with his mom before he heads off to school. Sometimes I’ll catch them right in the middle of the often difficult routine of getting him ready for school. He’s in preschool right now.

Often Alexander thoroughly rejects me. He won’t look at me, he won't even say hello. And if I go over to him, he whines or he calls for his mommy and runs away. This, as you might imagine, does not feel awesome first thing in the morning. The person I love the most in the world totally rejecting me.

When I can get him to explain why, he’ll tell me that he doesn’t like that I have "crazy hair" or that I smell. It feeds my overall sense of guilt that I’m not spending enough time with him. There are times when these interactions can make me sad or resentful, but on good mornings, if I go out into the living room and I sit quietly long enough, he will actually come over to me on his own. And on bad mornings, all I get is him reluctantly deigning to allow me to kiss him on the forehead.

I’m not a big one for metaphysical claims but Alexander is something of a miracle. We were told, Bianca and I, that it was a long shot that we would ever have a child. We went through IVF twice, in vitro fertilization. And in the second round, which we already knew was almost certainly going to be our last round, we got one egg. Everybody who goes through IVF is, of course, having fertility issues, but still, many of these people get 8 to 12 eggs. So again, we got one. And they implanted it, and now we have this giant, blonde kid running around the house as a result.

This is a huge deal for us to have a kid. And I really, really love him. And I do feel guilt about the fact that I'm not around as much as I would like to be. I do my best at this. You know, we deliberately found an apartment that's seven blocks from my office so I'm able to pop in and out and see him during the day. And it's also close to his school, so I do go pick him up when I can. Those school pick-ups are actually quite magical. He’s often surprised and delighted to see me, and will run right over and give me a hug.

Another thing I try to do is to organize regular father son dates, because I’ve found that when it’s just the two of us, he is much much nicer to me. So it's not like I never see him,
but I would love to see him more. I miss a lot of dinners at home and mornings and stuff like that.

One of my colleagues made a joke recently, he referred to my parenting style as “10% around,” which was kind of a funny joke but it definitely stuck in my head: Am I spending enough time with him? And when I do see him, he’s often so fixated on mommy that I’m persona non grata.

**GUNATILLAKE:** If you were to rate how present you are right now, what percentage would you score yourself? Ten percent, 50%? More? It can be a fun thing to do from time to time – and no need to give yourself a hard time if your score isn't so high. Right now, what would it be to grow your presence by 10%?

Come back to your breath. The feeling of the buds or headset over your ears. The sensations of this moment.

**HARRIS:** So I decide, in consultation with my wife, to try to be a little bit more proactive and take Alexander on a father/son trip so that we can connect in a whole new way. I wonder what a change of scene will bring. I hesitate traveling with a then-three-year-old. I worry he’ll revolt at the idea of being away from mommy for a while. So I gingerly broach the subject with him.

While he’s playing with his toys at the dining room table one night, I say, “What do you think little man? Do you want to go up to Boston? Do you want to go up to Boston and see your grandparents?” I grew up in Boston and my parents are still there. I ask him again, “Do you want to spend two nights just you and daddy?” And he says, “Yes.” I test him on this over the ensuing days, and he consistently says yes. So I put it on the books.

I buy us plane tickets and book us a room. I tell my parents to clear time in their schedules. As the trip approaches, I’m increasingly concerned that he’s gonna have a full-on temper tantrum when I pick him up and try to get him in the cab to the airport. What if he doesn’t want to leave mommy? What if the entire trip is traumatic and awful for both of us? What if he won’t let me put him to bed?

I used to put him to bed when he was a baby but ever since he’s been able to speak, he’s had a whole problematic sleep career. He will not let me put him to bed. His mom can put him to bed, his nanny can put him to bed, but not me. In fact, one time I arranged a night where both his mother and his nanny were out of the house so I would be the only option.

I remember he was sitting in the bath before bedtime, and after I’d finished shampooing him, it dawned on him that I was going to put him to bed. He started freaking out and whining in a way that suggested a full on bout of crying may be in the offing. One of the
cats happened to walk through the bathroom at that time. And I asked Alexander, “Would you be okay with Ruby putting you to bed?” And he said, “Yes.” I asked him, “Why?” And he said, “Because she’s a girl.” So there I was, second fiddle to Ruby.

GUNATILLAKE: Can you imagine being there, a fly on the wall? See Dan slumped, his son adamant, the cat nonchalant.

HARRIS: We leave on a Sunday. I finish work, walk into our apartment, and he’s in a great mood, all dressed up, hair combed, and ready to go. I walk over to him and ask “Are you ready?” He answers in the affirmative, enthusiastically. So I change out of my suit and call a car. We head to the airport and I do my best to get him talking on the way, about all the fun things we’ll do in Boston. I put a heavy emphasis on ice cream. He’s in a really good mood. He looks out the window. He laughs and enjoys himself.

Once we’re at the airport he’s a dream going through security. He insists though on riding on top of my roll-y suitcase. This is hard on my aging body, carrying this little beast on my suitcase through the airport all day, but we’re both having a really good time.

We land in Boston and go to the hotel together. We head straight to the pool for a little bit after checking in, and then his grandparents show up and we eat dinner in our hotel room. It’s a great time. And then the hour arrives where I’m going to have to put him to bed. I do have a strategy though. There is no official bedtime, I tell him. Instead we head out into the long carpeted hallways where it is game time. I make him run wind sprints – in his PJs – for an indeterminate period. Occasionally, other guests walk out of their rooms, and see what Alexander and I are doing, and they laugh at us.

If I’m able to get him tired enough, I’m thinking, then he’ll have no choice but to fall asleep. We have a whole set of games in the hallway where I run him up and down like a dog. He’s loving it, giggling and squealing as I chase him. I am clearly winning here. We head to bed to read some books. I don’t say anything about bedtime or going to sleep. We’re just reading books here. And after just a few minutes, he crashes! I should say, this kid, generally, is not a great sleeper. He wakes up all the time and screams in the middle of the night. But not tonight. Not on the boys trip.

GUNATILLAKE: With Alexander deeply asleep and Dan exhausted too, no doubt, how are your energy levels? If you want to raise them a little, try straightening the spine, opening the chest, raising the chin, letting the body lead the mind.

HARRIS: We spend the next day at Legoland. Me, Alexander, and his grandmother. Six hours. I am bored out of my mind, but he is having a great time – and it feels great just to watch him go. That night we have dinner at my parent’s apartment. His uncle, my brother who just happens to be in Boston that night, joins us. It’s really sweet. Just my original, nuclear family, right here with my little son who’s being a really good kid. Eating his
dinner: a bagel with an egg on it. He dances while he eats because that's what he does when he's happy. Everybody laughs and he says a lot of funny, cute things. The collective admiration and adoration of my family all focused on my little boy is really meaningful for me.

After dinner we head back to our hotel room. He runs more wind sprints in the hallway and again, sleeps through the night. On our last day, we head to the New England Aquarium. We look at all the fish. Alexander's attention span is limited, so we move very quickly from penguins to eels to sharks. He seems highly motivated to get me into the gift shop so he can get a treat.

When we get back on the plane to head home Alexander is great. He looks out the window the whole time, clutching the new stuffed animal I got him. As somebody who's been meditating for nearly a decade now, I've had many moments during this trip where I'm really glad to have the training because I'm able to just tune in to how, for lack of a less cheesy word, how sweet this experience is. I love this kid. Obviously, every parent loves their child. But especially given the fact that I'm an older dad, I'm 47, and given everything Bianca and I went through to get this kid, this whole situation is especially poignant.

When Bianca and I first had Alexander, I remember there being a whole tsunami of sentiment, both over email from my friends and on social media from people I didn't know, where we were being told and exhorted to “enjoy every moment” or “cherish every moment.” And I always wondered about that: Is this just a kind of perfunctory thing that people say or is it maybe based in some sort of remorse that they may feel about having let their kid's childhood slip by without really taking it all in while it was happening?

One of the many things meditation is designed to do is to wake you up and to help you be right here wherever you happen to be. Throughout the course of my jaunt with my son, there are a lot of little snapshots in my mind of him looking out the window as the plane flew; or watching him look at the penguins in the aquarium; or fiddle with legos at Legoland; or dance around, bagel in hand, while my family laughs.

And in all of these moments I was really able to do the opposite of zoning out – I was able to zone in. And in my experience, that really amplifies the awesomeness quotient immeasurably. The self awareness that I've been able to generate, that anybody can generate, through meditation allows me to notice and accentuate joy. And it can provoke what I consider to be healthy reflection about the fact, the inarguable fact, that these moments are fleeting, so it's best not to waste them by reflexively reaching for my iPhone or something.
GUNATILLAKE: In this world of distractions, our minds have become so well trained to jump from one thing to another. You might even feel that pull right now. If so, can you rest and acknowledge how Dan’s story is making you feel. Letting any enjoyment or appreciation sink in.

HARRIS: I should say there are a few moments during our trip where Alexander says he misses mommy. It hurts my feelings a bit, but I just do a version of what we’re told to do during meditation. Rather than denying or trying to paper over that his feelings exist, I get him to tune in to himself. I ask him: How does missing mommy make you feel? Sad? And if he says yes, which he usually does, I say “It’s ok to feel sad, I get it. But we’re going to see her very soon. And in the meantime, we’re gonna have fun.” Generally speaking, this works like a charm.

When we finally get home and ride the elevator up to our apartment, I prepare to tell his mother about what an amazing job Alexander did. Within minutes though, pretty much as soon as he’s around his mother again, he has a temper tantrum. Not at me, it’s directed quite squarely at her. This speaks, in my view, to the impenetrable bond he has with her and it actually makes me feel like this whole dynamic among the three of us is less about me and more about the fact that many children simply have intense relationships with their mothers.

And you know what, I think it’s great that they have this bond. It’s now clear that there’s nothing for me to feel jealous or resentful about. Clearly, the move here, is just for me to make time for Alexander and I to interact one on one, so we can build our own relationship.

And I think our boys trip really helped on that front. Interrupting the patterns, the grooves, in our everyday lives created new space for us to relate to one another differently. We’re building our own repertoire of private jokes and secret memories, mostly involving my allowing him to have more chocolate than mommy does.

So I’ve decided that I’m going to do it again. We’re already talking about going down to Florida together. I’ve also learned my lesson about the crazy hair in the mornings. Now, when I wake up, many days I put water in my hair so I look better for him. That has also helped. Oh, and the other day, he told me that he has now decided that daddy is, henceforth, allowed to put him to bed. So I’m finally on par with our cat Ruby.

GUNATILLAKE: Parenting is hard. Given that my own eldest child, a boy, is pretty much the same age as Alexander, there’s a lot that I recognize in Dan’s story, the importance of stepping out of everyday routines in order to connect.

But of all the themes, the one that stands out the most for me is the simple power of time spent together. When there’s disconnection, we solve it by connecting. Letting time and attention do their work.
Attention and connection are in their own way the heart of meditation. So since you’re here, why not join me in a short meditation inspired by Dan’s story. It’ll be in two parts and we’ll start here, just as you are.

Whatever position your body is in, if you’re moving or still, take a breath. Take two. Take as many as you want.

If it’s been one of those days, why not sigh? Letting the sound drain away any tension that you might have been holding.

And in this first part of this meditation, the idea is to just rest your attention with the body. No need to fixate on any area in particular, instead just resting, being aware of the body as a whole. Giving it your attention. Connecting. Letting the whole body, however it is, fill your awareness, soaking up your attention.

As you do so, there will be flickers away from your connection with the body – times when particular sensations, thoughts, feelings come in and takeover. As with Dan, these might include doubt, judgement, boredom, worry, tiredness. It’s ok. Whenever you notice your connection with your overall sense of the body break, just come back and start again. Bringing the attention back. Reconnecting.

Ok, now that you’re hopefully feeling a bit more grounded let’s move into the second part of the meditation. What I’d like you to do is to bring someone to mind that you wish you could spend more time with. For Dan it was his son. For me it’s my eldest sister. Who is it for you? There’s no right answer, but in my experience the first person you think of is probably the best person to go with.

If you’re a visual person, you can picture an image of them. But if, like me, you don’t have too much of a visual mind, just recall something about them, an event, a feeling, a story, an image without pictures. Whatever helps bring them to mind, whatever helps bring them into your awareness. And this is where we'll rest. Keeping your person in mind, spending time with the image of them.

It might feel totally contrived, totally fake. That’s ok. It can be like that sometimes. Just do it anyway. Bringing to mind the person you wish you could spend more time with and keeping them in awareness as much as you can.

As you do this, all sorts of thoughts may come up. Thoughts of regret, self-judgement, doubt. Thoughts of delight, happiness, and joy as you feel touched by them. They’re all ok. We do the best we can, you know.
Let this gentle attention towards your dear person forge a real sense of connection. They might be far away, they might be in the next room. You might have seen them just five minutes ago, or it could have been decades. It’s all ok.

Your body relaxed. Your breathing gentle. Your special person in mind. Filling your mind. Feeling the charge between you. Trusting the quality of your wish to spend more time with them. Deepening your connection. Just as Dan did with Alexander.