Meditative Story Transcript – Moj Mahdara

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MOJ MAHDARA: Mamani shows me pictures. Pictures of who she really is. Performing for 20,000 people in Dubai and Turkey. Pictures of herself with dignitaries during the Shah regime. Pictures with other big Persian pop stars. Pictures of her powder-blue Mercedes 450SL convertible.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Moj Mahdara is a serial entrepreneur and, as the CEO of Beautycon, plays a central role in the community of fashion and beauty brands and influencers. In today’s story Moj takes us back to her teenage years and how, while growing into her identity and herself, it was those of her two grandmothers that gave her inspiration and direction.

In this series, we blend immersive, first-person stories with mindfulness prompts to help you restore yourself at any time of the day. I’m Rohan, and I’ll be your guide on this episode of Meditative Story. From time to time, we’ll pause the story ever so briefly for me to come in with guidance to enhance your experience as you listen. I hope these prompts will be helpful to you.

Let’s take a moment to check in with ourselves, to really be here and really listen. Letting whatever is here, just be here. Allowing your experience, your life to manifest itself however it is.

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

MAHDARA: The day I discovered my grandmother was one of the greatest performers of Iran something clicked inside of me. I understood why I wanted to run away from my parents’ expectations, dye my hair purple, and work in the music industry – specifically MTV.

Suddenly, I made so much more sense to myself.

At the age of 13 and a half, I know I am gay. There’s no hiding it, I hate dresses, and I look like a boy. I hear my parents fighting. My mom says to my dad that his side of the family is to blame. That it is his genes. That it is his situation.

The rebellious genes do come from my dad’s side of the family. My parents have never wanted me to know that my dad’s mother is this provocative, controversial personality in Iran. That she is a movie star. A pop star. My grandmother paved the way for Persian pop culture. My family called her Mamani, but she had gone by Afat as a star.

It is snowing and ice-cold here in Erie, Pennsylvania. My grandmother flew all the way from Iran for a visit. When you come from that far, it's never a short trip. And since we're
Persian, there's no such thing as a hotel. She’s staying in the den in the basement, for weeks.

It’s a typical East Coast basement. You go down the stairs and there’s a bar and a sink, a bed and a couch. There’s also a pool table from the previous owners. Going down to see Grandma was like visiting a “bad girl”, a friend who your parents thought was a bad influence.

One day, I’m upstairs and I hear her sing. And I think to myself, “God, Mamani can really sing.” I sneak down to the basement and she’s sitting on this couch that is thick and scratchy, upholstered with carpet. It smells like cigarette smoke and liquor – bourbon, I think.

When she’s around, there is always music playing. Mamani tells me about the world. She tells me not to judge her for her dentures and her aging face. She tells me that she used to be one of the most beloved women of our country. She explains that after the Revolution, she had to change her name, that she couldn’t go by her entertainer name anymore. She had to go by a Muslim name, otherwise there would be trouble.

Iran isn’t a safe place for her to be who she really is. And she tells me that the world isn’t going to be safe for me either. She tells me all of this because she knows that my parents are picking on me all the time. Especially my mom. My mom takes the most issue with my identity. She constantly tells me to act like a girl, and to focus on my school, because otherwise I'll be a “hamburger flipper” at McDonald’s.

“Your mom,” my grandmother tells me, “is just a scared person who doesn’t know. She’s not cultured. And she’s not traveled. And she’s not worldly like me.” This puts my whole life in perspective. I realize that my mom’s perception of me is just that, her perception of me. It’s not actually who I am.

Mamani shows me pictures, pictures of who she really is. Performing for 20,000 people in Dubai and Turkey. Pictures of herself with dignitaries during the Shah regime. Pictures with other big Persian pop stars. Pictures with her powder-blue Mercedes 450SL convertible.

She’s not living an undercover identity as a normal person in Iran. But she knows her true identity. She is an icon.

**GUNATILLAKE**: Do you know your true identity? Does that question even mean anything to you? As you listen to this, breathing, when it comes to defining yourself to yourself, what matters to you?
MAHDARA: After my grandmother returns to Iran, I confront my dad: I don't understand how Mamani can be who she is, and still, my identity is a shock to him. Why is it surprising that I am rebellious too? Why does my nose piercing and dream of working in music disturb them so much? This is where I come from. How can that be surprising?

I'm struggling with my identity. I'm Iranian but I'm also American. I'm female but I act and dress like a boy. I'm gay. No one sees me. My parents don't understand me. They are angry and yell at me all the time. And I yell back. And I fight back.

My other grandmother, my mom's mom, Mamman Moty, is completely different – and really who I give credit for raising me. She lives with us. We share a room. She's this nice, sweet older Muslim woman who never gets remarried after her husband passes.

She marries into a well-to-do family when she's fifteen, and raises six kids. But her husband, my grandfather Mohamed, gets cancer and makes her a widow in her early 40s. There is no value placed on her education, so she never learns how to read, really. And suddenly, she finds herself dependent on her kids, on my mom who's the most progressive and independent of her kids. That's why she lives with us.

Even though I'm growing up in the house with my mom's mom, it's my dad's mom that I feel most related to after her visit. My mom's mom is just a devout, nice older lady – almost too nice. She never says anything bad about anyone. She is generous to a fault. If she had $5, she'd take me to Dairy Queen for an ice cream sundae. That chewy fudge and banana are my favorite. Mamman Moty loves ice cream and cherries. She saves all her money for gifts for all 19 of her grandchildren. We're all aware of her love and how lucky we are to have it. And to this date, we consider her to be a saint in our family, an elevated human spirit who can do no wrong.

My parents value education above all else. My mom challenges her mother to learn how to read. Her biggest motivation is to learn how to read the Quran. Then she becomes determined to become an American citizen. She needs to be able to read and write in order to take the questionnaire. And she doesn't want to be an illiterate woman. She doesn't want to die like that. And so my mom teaches me and Mamman Moty how to read farsi at the same time.

I'm in 3rd grade. It's summertime. My mom gives us each a book to read a week. At the end of the week, on Fridays, we each have to write a book report. One in English for me and one in Farsi for her.

My mom gives me a book on entrepreneurship, a thick hardback book with a smooth leather cover and a gold design on the spine. I am obsessed with it. So is my grandmother. We start studying every page together. We learn about Henry Ford. My
grandmother loves learning history, this concept that the children of immigrants can come to America and then one day they're like Henry Ford. She's enamored with the American dream.

History is a huge topic for us that summer. We read about American history and spend a lot of time debating the Civil Rights movement and what happened to Native Americans. We talk about the women's lib movement and women's rights. My grandmother and I basically read all through seventh- and eighth-grade history together and debate along the way.

My grandmother and I share a room that summer. It's Ramadan, so we wake up at four in the morning to make food before prayer. Her janamaz, her prayer blankets, are worn and smell like her. She keeps them under her bed. On the wall there are two pictures: the Prophet Mohammad and her late husband. The bedding is a polyester print with big flowers.

We talk to each other all the time. She can be the best roommate. But we also fight. We argue with each other a lot about the racial injustice embedded in American history. And as someone with a torn identity, half American and half Iranian, I'm adamant that racism is a thing. I've experienced it myself as a brown kid growing up in the middle of the country. Mamman Moty sees my perspective. She is passionate about injustice. I think it's because she comes from a place where she's seen her own country turned inside out, a country that has seen great injustice.

My Mamman Moty cries a lot. She is frustrated with how hard it is to read. Her nose runs when she cries and sweat gathers on her upper lip. My mom can be so hard on my grandmother. Mom is supporting her siblings, cousins, and 8 people living in our house. She and my dad work long hours to provide. My mom says things like, “We don't stop doing it just because it makes us want to cry. We're going to cry and then we're just going to get back to it.”

My grandmother pushes through. She wants to stretch herself. She insists it's not too late for her. She isn't someone who quits. She learned to read at the age of 57. And she spent the last 25 years of her life, till 84, reading every book under the sun. She becomes a scholar on every topic you can imagine.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Imagine being in the room with Moj as a girl and her grandmother, reading, studying, learning together. Can you notice their effort, her grandmother's energy and determination? What does it look like?

**MAHDARA:** Thirty years later, the first time someone writes an article about me, it says I am Iranian-American and gay. I remember calling the publicist and having a meltdown. I know that’s not a normal reaction, but I just want to be seen for who I really am, an
entrepreneur. Why do they have to put in that I’m gay? Or that I’m Persian? Why do they have to take all the focus and place it on my identity?

My wife is a big voice of wisdom in all of this. She’s Persian. And being with another Persian gives me a lot more pride – or maybe safety is the word. I guess I would say I am a late bloomer. My wife Roya will say, “You have all these tattoos and everyone knows you’re gay. Why are you trying to pretend to be this other thing?”

I tell her I’m not pretending, I’m trying not to offend anyone. It’s unnerving that your identity can offend people. So right out the door you spend a lot of time curtailing it. But I dream big and have more ambition than anyone I know. I am determined to make it. People who look like me – queer, brown, and butch – don’t make it as big and as far as I want to go.

Whenever I am stuck, frustrated, afraid, ashamed, set back, the spirits of my grandmothers light a fire underneath me that keeps driving me. My devout Muslim grandmother, Mamman Moty, and my pop-star grandmother, Mamani.

I am made up of these two different identities. A juxtaposition of my two different grandmothers. One who is Persian pop-culture royalty, rebellious, independent, and bold. She knows who she is, and hides her identity to live in her own country. The other is a devout Muslim woman who refuses to let her circumstances define her. She is determined and tenacious. At the time of her death, she had read close to 10,000 books.

The concept of creating yourself, being authentic to yourself, and authoring your own story – that isn’t some marketing gimmick. That’s something that I literally grew up knowing in my blood.

My grandmothers were both pretty hardcore. I think of the two of them all the time. I feel like they would both be very proud of me. They both had so many dreams for their own lives. They are with me whenever I face a crisis at work or at home. They guide me, and remind me to be rebellious and generous, independent and tenacious, and to never, ever forget who I am.

GUNATILLAKE: I loved how Moj’s grandmothers inspired her – and in very different and completely brilliant ways. Each an invitation to live the qualities that mattered to them. The challenge for Moj then being how to integrate those qualities together.

So that’s what we’ll do in our short practice together, invite two very different qualities and then see how they live together to create a whole.
And the first quality we’re going to invite is openness and relaxation. Representing Moj’s paternal grandmother’s creativity, let’s invite it in the body. Letting the body be comfortable, the belly open, the breathing open.


The second quality we’ll invite is uprightness. Representing Moj’s maternal grandmother, her stability, her dedication, let’s invite it into the body. Letting the back be upright. However your body is, expressing stability. A strong, solid connection with the earth.


Now holding both orientations in the body at the same time. The back, the spine upright and alert. The belly open and relaxed. Dedication and creativity.


Thank you.