Meditative Story Transcript – Susan David

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SUSAN DAVID: This series of love letters between my teacher and me go back and forth. When I say “love letters” I mean letters that are human-to-human, full of heart and compassion. Letters that help me process. Help me understand. Help me to just reflect and find the words for this experience that, for so long, has felt like a complete fog.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Some people think that the aim of meditation is to train yourself to the point that the messiness of life never arises and instead it’s just bliss and calm 24/7. But I’ve always believed that the purpose of meditation is to help us feel everything, the highs and the lows, feel them fully and with heart. Moved by life, but not shaken by it.

And with those thoughts, I’m excited in today’s Meditative Story that we’ll hear from Susan David. Susan is a psychologist, author, and TED speaker. The story she’ll share with us is all about courage in its various forms, all about turning to your fear and seeing it, and navigating a path through, which leads to freedom.

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.

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

DAVID: At around six years old, I start having this acute terror of death. Developmentally, it’s normal. It’s a time when most children become aware of mortality, of the fact that everyone dies at some point.

But one of my earliest memories surrounding this fear is this ritual at bedtime with my parents. Every night after we’ve had our hot chocolate together my parents follow me to my room. I walk across the familiar worn, green carpet, notice the photographs of my family on the wall, and I climb into my twin bed. It feels comfortable, clean and fresh.

“Goodnight, Mom. Goodnight, Dad,” I say to them individually.

They kiss me goodnight and go off to their room. And then I am in the dark. There is a flicker of light from outside that shines onto my bedroom wall. The shards of light illuminate the family photographs from time to time. In the distance I can hear the echoes of my parents’ voices.

That’s when it happens. I am overtaken by this sudden fear that one of them is going to die. And in my six-year-old imagination, this distorts into: one of them might be dead right now.
So I call out to them again, “Night, mom. Night, dad.”

“ok, Sue,” they both call back. “Goodnight.”

Five minutes later, I am calling out to them again. Really, it’s the child looking for reassurance, as children do, but in this case, it’s the reassurance they are both still alive. Like, I need to know they’re alive.

This fear morphs and develops as I learn to express myself. I get up often, in the middle of the night, to go lie down in their bed. I’m too scared to sleep. I tuck myself close to them and I whisper into the dark, “Promise me you’re not going to die. Promise me that when I grow up you’re going to be around.” I lay there in silence and then go to speak again, “Promise me all these things.”

The easy way out for my parents, for any parent, would be to say, “Don’t worry, I’ll be here. I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.” The easy way out for them would be to build a false narrative, to say things like “I’m not gonna die” or “Everything is ok.”

Instead, I hear my father say back to me, “We all die. I’m not some superhuman person who’s not going to die, nor is Mommy. We all die.”

He says this in a kind and gentle way. He treats me with incredible compassion, but also with respect. It’s as if my friend’s parents are lying to them. But my father, he refuses to lie to me.

What my father demonstrates to me in those long, dark, and terrifying nights is that it’s normal to be scared. It’s normal to experience difficult emotions.

My father has this firm commitment to the truth, to the opposite of denial. I spend my formative years in Apartheid South Africa. A white South African growing up in a society that’s effectively committed to not seeing the other. Committed to denial.

Building a narrative that hinges on denial is unsustainable. It doesn’t match the reality of human experience, where life’s most frail moments and its most sturdy moments, interwoven, are its beauty. We know that one day those we love will grow ill and eventually die. This galvanizes us to take life’s offers preciously, while at the same time, holding space for this truth: we won’t be here forever.

I start to experience the fact that I have this knowledge, that my Dad is going to die one day. I am going to die one day. Being scared is normal. My father teaches me that courage is not about being fearless. It’s about being able to show up to your fear and move forward anyway.
I am 15 years old when my father is diagnosed with terminal cancer. I am one of three children; my sister is seventeen, my brother is eleven.

After his diagnosis my father struggles a great deal with the idea of leaving my mother, the love of his life, and his three children behind. The pain and drugs cloud his mind.

GUNATILLAKE: Stories of illness, of death and dying, can be difficult to hear. Take some time to check in with yourself, pause the episode even, if that's what you need. And if you'd like to, bring to mind someone whose memory Susan's story has reminded you of. Being gentle with yourself as you do.

DAVID: My father has a brother who is religious. This cancer brings about a new form of seeking for my father, another step towards finding a religious identity for himself.

Between conversations with his brother, which punctuate failed treatments for the cancer and terrified confusion, the idea is planted that he will be fine if he just stays positive and has enough faith. This idea takes root. Once it does, a story builds in my father’s mind: Being positive and having faith means God will give him what he needs. God will heal him. The opposite is true too then, his thinking goes: If he is not being healed, it's because he doesn't have enough faith in God. And his death then, is his fault.

A woman comes to visit my father at our house six weeks before he dies. It is a Sunday. Usually on Sundays music plays throughout the house. We dance, and sing, and eat. But on this Sunday, my father is dying and the music has stopped. His visitor, like my uncle, is very religious. She is dressed in a long plaid skirt. She sits across my father in a chair. He lies propped up in bed. His skin has the parlor of death, and yet his hair is still fiercely dark and curly and his face holds his gentle dark chocolate eyes. He and his visitor talk for a while and when she leaves, sobbing breaks the silence. I see my father bent over, literally sobbing. He tells us that this woman said he is dying because he doesn’t have faith. He believes her.

My father in his desperate confusion somehow gets it into his head that his life insurance policy is a symbol that he doesn’t have enough faith in God healing him. If he believes God’s going to heal him, then why does he need an insurance policy?

My father has been paying into this policy his entire life, but now with a diagnosis of terminal cancer, he lets it lapse. It ultimately means that when he dies our family has nothing.

Sometimes people ask me: Aren't you angry at him? But I never think of it like that. There’s this vulnerability that we all have to confront when we are suffering. And in that vulnerability is often where we seek false positivity or denial. One of the gifts my father
gave me was that he really saw me completely. I think in turn, that gave me the ability to really see him.

My father dies on Friday. He is 42 years old.

My mother tells me to go say goodbye to him. I walk into the room. His eyes are closed but I can still sense he is there. Present. Even with his eyes closed, I would always feel seen by my father. Always.

I think to myself, “He knows I am still here. I know he is still here.”

I say goodbye to him and I go off to school. At around 4 minutes past 2:00 pm, I turn to my girlfriend and say, “My father just died.” And just like that, I know he is gone.

I go back to school on the Monday. I walk into the brick building and head towards the second level to my classroom. As I move down the corridor everything appears like it is in slow motion around me, as if in a film. I enter my classroom and I am greeted with a wall of silence. Every Monday there is a vibrant chatter: “What did you do on the weekend?” “I did this and that with my parents.” But no one talks about the weekend to avoid using the word “parent”, “father”, or “mother.” They don’t want to upset me.

I have this feeling inside of me which says, “you just need to get on with it.” The months to follow are a blur. It’s like going from math to history to science to biology. May. June. July. August. September. November.

I go through the motions. People ask how I am doing. “I’m ok,” I tell them. Because isn’t that what you say? Isn’t that what people expect of you?

It’s almost like I’ve become this master of being “ok.” People admire that because, oh, you’re being so strong. They perpetuate it. They feed into it. And I say it back, “I am so strong for being ok.”

But in truth, my family and I are struggling. Financial difficulties come at us from every angle and creditors are knocking. My mother is grieving.

But there’s this one teacher, Mrs. F., who knows what is actually going on. She too lost a parent at a young age. She knows the pain beneath the veneer of strength.

One day when I go to class Mrs. F. hands out these notebooks. The notebooks are unremarkable. The pen I use to write in them is unremarkable. Similar to how any single letter itself is unremarkable. And yet, this notebook will go on to hold so much pain and hope for me.
With her kind, distinct blue eyes, she looks my way and says to the class, “Write.” It’s an invitation to keep journals. “Write. Tell the truth. Write like no one is reading.”

“Tell the truth.” This frees me up. It is the first experience since my father’s death where someone has actually invited me to show up to my grief and pain and regret.

I go home and sit down to journal. I start to write little bits of poetry. Notes. Thoughts. Raw feelings. I hand the journal in to Mrs. F. the next day.

She writes back to me.

And so, I start this secret, silent correspondence with my English teacher where every day I write about the heartbreak I am experiencing. And my teacher writes back to me in pencil. Never pen. She never writes in pen. It’s like she doesn’t want to mark the journal in any way. It is my work. In her light pencil, she writes back, as if to say, “I’m giving you this response but I’m not defining you. I’m not defining your experience.”

This series of love letters between my teacher and me go back and forth. When I say “love letters” I mean letters that are human-to-human, full of heart and compassion. Letters that help me process. Help me understand. Help me to just reflect and find words for this experience that, for so long, has felt like a complete fog.

It’s a simple act, most profound acts are, but it’s a quiet revolution for me. It’s a revolution for me to process what is happening. To actually figure out how to be kind with my emotions. To see my emotions for what they are. To stand in my truth. To not lie to myself. This is my father’s lesson.

Here, in light pencil, my teacher holds space for me and my emotions. All of them. That’s it. She’s just holding space. It isn’t hinged on feeling better, doing better, setting goals, or getting over things. She’s just holding space for me.

There’s this beautiful, powerful word we have in South Africa. It’s “Sawubona”, an everyday Zulu greeting. Yet, “Sawubona” literally translated means, “I see you. And by seeing you, I bring you into being.”

I’ve come to think of that word Sawubona as a symbol for how we create space for one another, and how we create space for ourselves.

My father gave me a Sawubona when he held me through those long dark nights, reminding me that we all die, that it was normal to be scared. He saw my fear. And in seeing it, he helped me to understand that courage is not the absence of fear but, rather, is born out of compassionately sitting with fear. He saw me.
And I think this is what Mrs. F. gives me when she hands back the notebook with the questions in light pencil. She hands me a Sawubona. A lifeline that says, “I see you.”

GUNATILLAKE: I wonder if there’s anyone in your life right now to whom you can give this real gift, that of being seen? Take a moment to choose someone, the first person that comes to mind will do. And holding them in your mind offer them these words: I see you.

DAVID: My son Noah is born some twenty years after this journal exchange with my teacher. I have a clear memory of one specific day shortly after his birth.

I take Noah to the doctor. He wears a soft little jump suit and is wrapped up in a teeny little blanket. He is born with these bushy eyebrows and black hair similar to my fathers. He is smiling, gurgling, and happy. I hand him over to the doctor to give him his shots. The doctor removes Noah’s onesie and exposes his teeny little arm.

Noah tenses, his face crumples. He changes from a calm, smiling buddha baby into one who is completely outraged. At a young age, children haven’t fully formed their tears. So they might cry but they’re not actually showing tears. This is Noah in the doctor’s office. Red in the face, he’s in tune with the shock of what’s happening to him and he starts screaming. His tears come for the first time.

I do what most people do in this situation. I pick him up and I say, “It’s ok.” I reassure him and the doctor looks at me, barely stopping what he is doing, and kindly, gently says to me, “Susan, it’s not ok.”

“You know, one day your son will come home and will be upset because something didn’t go well at school. And you won’t be able to fathom why he is so upset because this very same thing might have happened a hundred times before that, but on this particular day, he is upset. Or you may not understand why it is that going to the same camp he’s gone to every year, now suddenly, today he doesn’t want to go. And you might think it should be ok. Or you might not understand why he’s scared of swimming or diving, or whatever it is.”

I go home, brooding, a new mom, hormonal, beating myself up. I think to myself, “I’ve got a flipping Ph.D. in this stuff!” And the first time that my child is in real pain, I completely invalidate his emotions. I do the very thing that all the research says, stuffs up your child up for life. I don’t make space.

GUNATILLAKE: Make space. Whatever that instruction means to you in this moment. Wherever you might be. Whatever you might be doing. Let what is happening just happen without having to crowd it. Make space.
DAVID: I am ruminating, dwelling on my mistake, when my husband Anthony comes home from work. Anthony is this very funny, dry humor doctor.

I hear Anthony’s key slide in the door and turn. He walks in wearing his blue hospital scrubs, carrying his black backpack, and innocently asks “How was your day?”

“You’ll never believe what I did today,” I tell him. “I took Noah to the doctor and he was really upset and I said to him, ‘It’s ok. It’s ok. It’s ok.’”

Anthony listens to me raging on and on about this experience, about why I’m a bad mom; I should have known better. He listens and listens and listens to me. And finally when I pause, he looks at me and says to me, just so quietly, “It’s ok, Sue. It’s ok.”

Together, we just start laughing because he was, of course, purposefully trying to be funny. And I think back to my dad and how he was the one to tell me it is normal to be scared and here I am doing the opposite with my son, filling him with all senses of false positivity. Opening the door to him feeling unseen.

But here is my husband, standing beside me, holding this thing so lightly and then letting it go with laughter. There’s power in that. It’s so profoundly important. To hold something lightly and then let it go.

It was his way of saying, “I see you and it will be ok.” We are not defined by any one moment, even though a single moment can be incredibly important.

When I think about wholeness, it all comes back to this idea of creating a space where we can show up to ourselves with compassion. It’s a correspondence with our own heart. And when we do this, we give ourselves a Sawubona.

When we are truly able to see ourselves, we’re more able to see others too.

I see you. And it will be ok.

GUNATILLAKE: I see you. One way of understanding meditation is that it is the act of seeing. Seeing, knowing, being with. And if what we see brings up judgement, aversion, grabbiness, then seeing that too.

I see you. What do you see in this moment? What part of your experience is asking you for your attention? For me, it’s the warmth of the air around me on my skin. That’s what’s most prominent. What is it for you?

I see you. Now is a different now to before. What do you see in this moment?
I see you. Susan’s story was one of emotions, one filled with emotion. What emotion, what tone is here to be seen, however quiet?

And if Susan’s words brought up some difficult memories or feelings, acknowledging that. It’s ok. Grateful for the fact that we are sensitive beings. And breathing. Breathing. Emphasising the out breath. Letting its natural qualities of relaxation and release, connect and ground you.

I see you. If you were to write down how you were feeling in this moment, what would you write?

I see you. Whatever you are seeing right now, how are you seeing it? What is your relationship with what you are experiencing? Are you pushing it away, holding onto it, or maybe ignoring it?

I see you. By seeing you I bring you into being. What are you bringing into being right now?

I see you. By seeing you I bring you into being.

The mysterious dance of our awareness and what it is aware of. Together, but not the same. One informing the other.

By seeing you I bring you into being. Can you sense into how the way we see affects what we see? How are you seeing? How are you bringing your experience into being?

Sawubona.

Thank you