

Meditative Story Transcript – Angela Ahrendts

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ANGELA AHRENDTS: I stand mesmerized seeing this eagle soar and dive, soar and dive. At this moment it's the strangest thing, an inner peace takes over me with each breath. I feel this sudden clarity, this deep confidence. An idea quickly builds inside of me: I am not a tree; I am not supposed to stay permanently fixed and rooted where I am. My three babies will fly the nest. They'll be gone. The eagle is my sign in my storm. I am supposed to fly.

ROAHN GUNATILLAKE: Angela Ahrendts is best known in the business world where as CEO of Burberry she turned the company around, and then stepped out of the number one position to help Apple reinvent its famous retail store environment. But the Meditative Story she shares today couldn't be further from the high-flying worlds of fashion and technology – it's about finding sanctuaries that we can turn to for clarity when new direction and new possibilities show up in our lives.

In this series, we combine immersive first-person stories and breathtaking music with the science-backed benefits of mindfulness practice. 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.

AHRENDTS: With a blanket tucked beneath my arm, I head out into the backyard, basking in the warm afternoon light. I make my way past the tall maple tree to the strawberry patch lining the back fence, close to the large swing set my parents built.

I spread out the blanket on the grass and lay down. Newfie, my sweet tempered – and enormous – Newfoundland, sits next to me. I like to be quiet and alone sometimes. I'm ten years old.

We live in a modest home in a small Midwestern town in Indiana. My father is a business owner and rises early each morning to head off to work. My mother rises even earlier to begin the bigger job of managing our large, busy family. My parents had six kids in seven years, five girls and one boy. I'm the third. In our loving home there's a constant din: music playing, pots clanging, dishes jostling. All seven of us bull our way through the kitchen – to cook, snack, set the table, clean the table. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. As soon as one meal is done, the next one seems to begin – just constant motion. And there's usually a tussle over something.

“You have my shirt on.”

“She took my ball.”

“Did somebody feed the cat?”

It’s hard to find a moment in the waking hours that isn’t filled with noise: laughter, quarrels, conversations, and debates.

I share a small bedroom with my two sisters. We’re very different. My oldest sister is a reader, an intellectual. She probably reads a book a day, the straight-A student. My second sister is an athlete and very outgoing. An all-state diver, no matter what sport, she excels at it and makes friends just as easy.

I don’t excel at anything. I’m kind of okay at sports and a straight-B student. I’m the most timid. The most insecure. And, because of that, I’m always searching. Always looking for something to lead me, guide me, protect me, help me.

It’s not that I’m unhappy. I’m just without confidence. In this loud house, everyone has an opinion, a strong opinion. I feel like a spectator. I listen and learn, but I have no idea what my opinions are – and even when I do, I’m not generally eager to share them. I prefer calmness over conflict.

So I come out here in the backyard in the early afternoons to get away from the commotion. I lay in the grass for hours at a time. I escape with my thoughts while the birds sing overhead in the maple tree.

I look up and watch the clouds roll by. I trace them with my eyes, narrowing in on what I think resembles an angel with fluffed wings. Its shape emerges, creamy white in a bright blue sky.

The cloud angels make me feel safe. I imagine them looking down on me, returning my gaze. Like they’re lifting me up, taking me to another place. I don’t feel afraid and weak. I feel like I’m stronger in some way. I’m comforted, I can relax, I can dream.

I’ve never spoken outwardly about my cloud years. My sisters will think I’m nutty. But lying there in the grass, I feel like these angels are with me. Encouraging and empowering me.

Looking back now, this spot in the backyard becomes my first sanctuary.

GUNATILLAKE: While Angela lies on the soft grass, her body is relaxed as her mind wanders and dances amongst the clouds. Use this image to inspire whatever relaxation is accessible to you in this moment: ease, delight even. We’ll stay here for a moment.

AHRENDTS: We have one full bathroom upstairs and a little half bath downstairs. And there are five of us girls. So you do the math. Hair, make-up. And of course as we get older, there are boyfriends. And just one phone.

Everyday, someone is constantly yelling, "Mom, she's been on the phone too long!" Or "Mom, they've been in the bathroom too long, it's my turn!" It's constant. Just constant. It's too cold to go outside, so I create a little space underneath our hall stairs. And I find my escape. It's a narrow space, about three feet by five feet. I kneel down to go in and shove past all the heavy winter coats. I can't really do much more than lay down once inside.

The crawl space is unfinished, it has two-by-fours, but no sheetrock. I plug in a little black light and it gives off a violet neon glow. I place cushions I've sewn myself on top of old carpet remnants to lay down on. In the corners, I set candles I dipped – red, blue, pink. There are trinkets I find, books I collect. I paint song lyrics and poems on the underside of stairs. I love to do things with my hands. Everything here is handcrafted. Cat Stevens plays from my little recorder. This is my sanctuary under the stairs.

Calm washes over me as I lay here.

I draw. I craft. I dream.

I keep a stack of magazines beneath the stairs with me. I'm especially drawn to the classifieds in the back pages that invite readers to write in for more information on different states. I love the images: Photos of white water rafting in Colorado, skiing in Nevada, waterfalls in Yosemite, shopping in Soho, and the California beaches that seem to go on forever. I handwrite letters to each address, drop my letters off at the post office, and a few weeks later, a large envelope shows up full of maps and pamphlets – New Jersey. Maine. The Sunshine State.

Traveling isn't an option for me. We can't afford plane tickets, or long distance vacations. The TV only gets a few channels. We live in the middle of the country, surrounded by cornfields. So I pour over these pamphlets, imagining myself in the world out there. I want to journey to new places, feel the culture, meet people. I want to fly, experience something larger than my current circumstances. I create a space to dream and use my imagination to think of where I may go.

I fall in love with a guy from my highschool. He lives a mile down the road from me. We marry and move to New York and both take on big jobs and bigger jobs. We eventually have a house in the countryside with our three children. The house is white and sits on top of a hill.

It's 5:00 a.m. I head to the kitchen. I press on the coffee maker and wait for it to brew. I look through the wide glass window above the sink that frames the rolling fields outside. A magnificent oak tree stands in the center of my gaze. It's very old. So old, that we attach metal bars to help it stand up, like a wise old man with a cane. The wingspan from its branches create a canopy of shade! It feels like an old soul.

During the day, my kids play on a swing that we made and hung from the old Oak's branches, giving the tree it's fresh life. I think of all the things this tree has seen. How many generations of children have played under that tree, how many times its leaves have fallen, how many times it's bloomed in the spring.

I stand here by the kitchen sink. I look beyond the trees; nature surrounds me. Everyone is still asleep. In my bathrobe and slippers, I take my large mug of coffee, a blanket and a book, and I head outside. I'm in my purest, most open state. I feel the wind. I see the sunrise pouring through the trees. I hear the birds. I read. I meditate. My body awakens. My mind awakens. I leave my phone inside – I don't open emails or do any kind of work. This quiet hour sets the tone for my day.

I am clearer, calmer, I am nicer, and I shine my light brighter.

Here, the sanctuary is this magic hour before anyone else wakes up. The stillness I find. The beauty of a morning untouched by people, meetings, obligations. I enjoy the calm before the chaos. A new day marches in. I find room to dream in new directions.

GUNATILLAKE: We all have morning routines, but not everyone's are as intentional as Angela's and can be just a habit we've accumulated by default. But how we spend the first hour or so upon waking can really set the tone for the day ahead so tomorrow morning, why not get interested in what routine you have, and explore how you might nudge it more towards calm.

AHRENDTS: Years and continents later, my career in fashion is booming. My family moves with me to England so I can become CEO of Burberry. My family is thriving and there are dozens of things I'm juggling. And then I'm called to make a complicated decision. I'm offered a big new job with Apple, in California. Accepting it will uproot my family again.

After months, I'm mentally and emotionally worn. So my first decision is ... to put off deciding. We travel back to my family home in Indiana. For two weeks, the first thing I do every morning is go out with my coffee and just read for three, four hours. I pause. I look up at the trees. I look up in the sky. Where are my signs now? I open myself to receive guidance. To receive help.

I sit out on the porch again and think, perhaps I'm just not meditating enough, not reading enough, not opening up enough. All of a sudden, the wind starts blowing. A

storm is coming. I watch the huge trees sway from side to side, their leaves twisting, their trunks bending. They are so strong and firmly planted. They will be fine.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of a lone bald eagle soaring through the sky. I know a pair of eagles lives on the property. That summer they have three babies. I have three babies; I can't help but smile at this. It's like our lives are in rhythm as they're preparing them to leave the nest.

The storm begins to pick up. I stand mesmerized seeing this eagle soar and dive, soar and dive. At the moment it's the strangest thing, an inner peace takes over me with each breath. I feel this sudden clarity, this deep confidence. An idea quickly builds inside of me. I am not a tree; I am not supposed to stay permanently fixed and rooted where I am. My three babies will fly the nest. They'll be gone. The eagle is my sign in my storm. I am supposed to fly.

I walk to my husband and share my decision, as clear as day.

Growing up, it was angels I saw in the clouds, signs that made me feel safe and freed me to dream. Today, it's the sign of an eagle that gives me courage and strength to take daring leaps, to soar into the great unknown without feeling afraid.

Throughout my life, I've carved out little sanctuaries and moments each day to reconnect with myself. Moments to imagine beyond what's right in front of me. This meditative space allows me to dream, to listen for my calling and find the confidence to make decisions. I still dream, just as I did beneath the stairs of my childhood home. But the dreams... they look different now. They're larger, more abstract.

When I'm young, I dream of falling in love. I dream of traveling, of having a career. I dream of having babies, a home. These are things that many of us dream about. Now I've been blessed to be married 26 years. I've stepped down from another big job. I ask myself: What does life look like when you meet what was once your dreams?

I meet with a pastor I've followed for more than 40 years. He senses my restlessness. "Relax" he says to me. "Maybe this year is a gift to you and it's telling you to get everything done and get your life in order because you're going to be called again."

Today I create my sanctuary sitting in a curved vestibule in my home, with a table that holds photos of my cherished family. I set my coffee down and open the curtains. The sunlight comes flooding in. After all these years, I still find myself creating time and space not only to read and connect with my thoughts – but also to be grateful, and to feel connected to something greater than myself to truly fulfill my purpose. I do this everywhere I go.

At the beginning of every new chapter of my life, I'm insecure. I fear failure, even though things have often ended up better than I dreamed. So I trust there is yet another dream. I pause. I wait. I meditate. And I try to keep myself in a position where I'm open to what's coming next. I have an instinct that it won't be like anything I've ever done before. I think there are going to be new learnings, new everything.

I've been very fortunate in my life. I've found many sanctuaries. Beneath stairs. On wet grass. In the pages of magazines. In dreams and in skies. Every new morning presents me with an opportunity to find a new sanctuary where I am. Because the real sanctuary is within me.

Every morning I build it with intention. I craft it. I build it into the daily rhythms of my everyday life. And every day, I keep an eye out for the next angel, the next eagle. The next sign to guide me.

GUNATILLAKE: Thank you, Angela. I can really picture those angel clouds. Who hasn't looked up into the bright blue sky with wonder and imagination? Such a lovely scene. In just a moment, I'll guide you through a closing meditation.

The idea of sanctuary is one that is really important in meditation, and to me. And it's the one I want to play with for our short meditation together. For Angela, sanctuary is something about finding a space of her own, and a calm space amongst all the noise. So let's tune into that. It might have been a while since you've used an analogue radio. You know, one with a dial where you have to really tune into a station just right or else only hear buzz and crackle. That's the image or the metaphor I invite you to remember as we practice sanctuary together.

Wherever you are and whatever is around you, somewhere here is quiet and calm, silent even. Let's tune into it. Scanning the body for any sensations of softness, of relaxation. Moving past any crackle of tension and tuning into calm. It might be in the out breath. It might be in the muscles of the face as you smile. Tune in, and find out. Passing over any buzz, any crackle and letting your mind tune in, settle into some calm in the body. Any oasis will do.

Crackle, fuzz, and static might be more obvious in the mind. Fragments of thoughts, seemingly solid stories, they get plenty of airtime as it is. So just for this short while, let's move past them and tune into quiet. The gaps between thoughts. The silence behind thoughts.

Softening the mind and finding sanctuary even in the busiest of minds, even today. The fact you've chosen to listen to our podcast means you have the intention, the orientation towards calm. Act upon that and see if you can tune into it. It might need a delicate touch on the dial of your attention but you can do it. Moving past noise and letting your attention, your awareness drop into silence.

Sanctuary.

There is another meaning to sanctuary beyond calm and space that I feel is so important, and it's safety. If we don't feel safe, then it's not possible for us to relax. If we don't feel safe, then there is no spare space to look inside, because we feel under threat.

When I have the good fortune of guiding a meditation for people in the same room as them, a bit of a trick I use when getting going is to say a line like "Know that as you practice here, you are safe and protected." And each time I can notice a tiny softening as just those words drop away some armor.

But right now, I can't tell you that you are safe. But I can invite you into softening. If your body, your body/mind is being protected by some armor, some hardness, some tension. I'm not going to ask you to let go of your armor. All I'm going to do is ask you to notice it. Thank it even. It's doing a job. And if you do feel a sense of safety, feel that in the body. Tune into that. And know that vulnerability is a form of privilege.

And to finish off I invite you to just reflect on what sanctuary means to you and explore how you might be able to access that right now. And indeed whenever you want – or rather, need it.

Thank you. And go well.