

Meditative Story - Mickey Guyton

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MICKEY GUYTON: Something is missing. I have a unique story, and yet here I'm trying to look and sound like every other artist that's making country music. Trying to fit in, trying to act the part to be noticed. It can't work. It just isn't me. In my life, I'm always taught to listen.

When I was younger I'd listen to my elders, I listened to my mom, I listened to Micah. If I listened... I could fit in. If I listened... I could get approval. I do everything they tell me, and nothing works. I feel like a stallion tied up in a stable, itching to run free.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Mickey Guyton is as country as they come. As a young girl raised on the gravel roads of central Texas, she fell in love with the music of Dolly Parton, an influence that still informs her approach to singing and songwriting. But as a Black woman in a traditionally white industry, Mickey has had to brave questions of authenticity that would never be asked of her contemporaries. Her new EP is called "Bridges," and if the old saying that all that country music is is three chords and the truth, then "Bridges" truly is a kind of gospel itself, a record filled with songs as courageously personal as they are defiantly political. Do queue it up.

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.

GUYTON: My family is country. Real country. Like, I've got cowboys in my family country. Gravel, dirt roads, sprawling dry fields of wild grass-country. Legit. My grandmother is poor, but she keeps her tiny shack so clean. Still, an old dusty smell permeates everything: the tin cupboard I play in, the floral sheets I adore. I just love that smell.

Inside Grandma's shack, VHS tapes stand in piles: the Roots miniseries, Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers, "Fried Green Tomatoes" and "Steel Magnolias." My grandma is the one that turns me on to country music. At my home I'm only allowed to listen to gospel. But my grandma? She is a huge Dolly Parton fan.

Grandma listens to "Coat of Many Colors," a song about Dolly Parton's mother, who made a coat from rags. It's the same in my family, except those coats are quilts that grandma made – patchwork, with jagged lines, the stitching a little off. Grandma makes these quilts out of her own clothes, to keep her children warm, because she can't afford blankets. They're the ugliest – and most beautiful quilts – I'll ever see.

When I visit, we lay those quilts on the floor and watch her Southern movies and those videos of Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton. I stare at the TV mesmerized, knowing she's there behind me in her rocking chair, talking with my mom, enjoying my joy. She doesn't say much, grandma, but she exudes love.

When I look back at her she says, "I love you thiiiiiiiis much," spreading her arms as wide as she can.

GUNATILLAKE: It's a lovely scene. Mickey on the floor, her grandma's reassuring presence behind her, radiating love. Is there anyone in your life whose big heart provides you that comfort, whose love gives you the confidence to dream and imagine? Try to bring that person to mind. Connecting with those who bring meaning to our lives can give us perspective or a sense of gratitude when we need it.

GUYTON: My mother pushes a big, white Victorian-looking dresser in front of the doorway so I can't get out of my room. I hear the clinking of those ugly brass handles as she slides it into place.

It's a tall dresser. I'm a small girl, 6 years old, but I manage to climb up on top of it, pulling the drawers out a little to use them as steps. I just want to be near her. But I can't, she won't let me. Today that part of the house is closed off to me. And I have no idea why. I can't force myself to climb down the other side. I'm not allowed. I don't want to get in trouble and I'm scared of hurting myself.

I peer over the edge of the dresser and see the brown carpeting running down the hallway. I sit there, perched up on top, for a long time. Beneath the hum of our television I hear the muffled sounds of my mother. It sounds like she's on the telephone. I cry, loud enough to be heard. But she doesn't come.

So I climb back down into my bedroom. I tuck one of my Cabbage Patch dolls beneath the ruffled white comforter of my canopy bed, lay the doll's head on the pink pillow and crawl in beside her, squeezing her as tight as I can.

I'm the only Black kid in an all-white private school, Trinity Lutheran. I'm here because otherwise I'd be the only Black kid in an all-white public school.

I'm 8 years old. I've just won second place in the spelling bee. I share this with Micah, one of the boys in my class. He listens with a scowl. He touches his own participation ribbon and says, "Well, at least I'm not Black."

Later, in social studies, the map of Africa is pulled down in front of the class, and Micah keeps saying the N-word instead of Niger. And every time he does, the classroom erupts

in laughter. I don't really know what the word means, but I feel a deep sense of shame. The teacher doesn't chastise him. All she says is that it's actually pronounced Ni-ger.

I'm not the run home and tattletale kind of a kid. I just take it all in – and wish that I was something else.

On Sundays, I see a very different world than I do the rest of my week. My family attends an all Black Baptist church – a gospel church.

As I walk through the foyer into the hall, I notice the ocean blue carpet. I see the red pews with the wood backs and the stained glass windows along the walls. Suits for the gentleman and big hats for the ladies. The smell of old lady perfume is everywhere. The cheap fragrance mixes with the smell of fresh hair, sprayed, burnt, done up.

I sit near the front, sweating in my floral dress, scratching the coarse fabric of the Hanes pantyhose I hate – but am forced – to wear.

When the message is delivered by the preacher at the pulpit, women run up and down the aisles, hollering and raising their hands, praising the Lord and passing out. "Catching the spirit," they say. I think: "I don't want that spirit to catch me."

I glance back at the balcony, away from the commotion, where I really want to sit. Far away from the spirit. But my parents forbid it: sitting all the way up there, you aren't close enough to God, to the message.

Church is where I learn to sing, how to harmonize. My church choir teacher instructs us to listen, to hear what people are actually singing – that's how we'll find the harmony. Don't over-sing, don't outshine, just complement.

Because I spend the week surrounded by white kids, I notice that I speak differently than the Black folks at my church. They love me, don't get me wrong. But I get plenty of "You sound like a white girl." And I'm thinking "What does that even mean?"

On Sundays, I wonder if I'm Black enough.

My whole life changes on a trip to a Texas Rangers game – before the players even take the field, before the game even begins. I sit in the nosebleeds with other folks from my gospel church. I look down. The infield is perfectly smooth, it's red clay brilliant against the bright green grass.

The announcer says, "And now, our national anthem, sung by 10-year-old LeAnn Rimes." The jumbo screen shows a little girl with blonde curly hair, in a blue denim outfit, with an American flag bedazzled on her back.

When LeAnn opens her mouth to sing it's like a grown woman soars from the depths of her little body. Her voice – that big voice – enraptures the stadium. Everybody hangs on every last word. I've got chills all over my body, just watching her, just hearing that voice.

GUNATILLAKE: It's funny. I've got chills imagining Mickey having chills about LeAnn Rimes singing so powerfully. Can you see how Mickey is as she listens? Alert, bright, energized, listening with her whole body. How are you holding your body right now? Try relaxing your neck, your shoulders, even your toes. You may find that as your body settles, so will your mind.

GUYTON: In that instant, I know: I want to sing country music. I want to stand exactly where she is.

The crowd barely waits for her to finish, they erupt in cheers and applause. I'm enamored with her, but I am also, like, "I can do that." I'm not jealous, I feel competitive. I can do that.

I absolutely want that feeling. That whole ride back I try to sing the national anthem but don't know the words, so I make them up. I can't stop thinking about that voice. The crowd. The applause. The performance.

So here I am in Nashville. Grown-up, out of the house, pursuing a career in country music. Nashville has a system. There's a way they do things. So I use the producers they tell me to use. And the musicians, and the writers, too. I do everything they tell me to. And nothing works.

Something is missing. I have a unique story, and yet here I'm trying to look and sound like every other artist that's making Country music. Trying to fit in, trying to act the part to be noticed. It can't work. It just isn't me.

In my life, I'm always taught to listen. When I was younger I'd listen to my elders, I listened to my mom, I listened to Micah. If I listened... I could fit in. If I listened... I could get approval. I do everything they tell me, and nothing works.

So I discount myself as an artist, discount myself as a songwriter. I start to believe I'm not good enough. And I don't deserve to be here. I feel like a stallion tied up in a stable, itching to run free. But right in front of me there's a barrier. And I'm just terrified to leap over it.

On radio tour, when I visit a station, I walk right by the R&B hip-hop studio. Through the glass doors I see the red on-air light reflecting in faces that look like mine. Each time I rush by I feel like I'm abandoning a part of myself. Why don't I just stop in? Say hi? "Hey, I'm Mickey. I sing country music but I'd love to talk about it with your radio station." It

seems so easy to say. But I keep trying to prove to everybody that I am super country, that country is where I'm supposed to be, which it is, but why don't I stop and say hi to the Black producers and artists and hosts?

One Sunday morning I'm drawn to church. It's 8 am. I'm not really listening. And then I tune in to the very last thing the says – it's the only thing I hear all morning: "It's ok to question God."

My whole life I've been made to feel like I can't question anyone around me. My mother, the white boys and girls in my private school, my choir teacher, my managers – and God.

Monday Bible group, Wednesday night prayer, Saturday choir rehearsal, and Sunday service – a lifetime of worship, and I still don't ask God any real questions. I walk home in a daze, get into bed fully clothed, pull the covers over my head and start sobbing. I'm overwhelmed by the feeling that I've wasted my life.

Here I am: alone, broke. I cuss God. It just all feels so unfair.

I take a deep breath, get humble, and start self-reflecting. Instead of blaming other people for why certain things are – or aren't – happening in my life, I look really hard at myself, at where and why I failed. And that's when it hits me. It all seems so simple.

I need to speak up for myself. I have choices. I have every bit of ability to succeed, and the same freedom as everybody else to say no, and to speak my mind and write my truth. I have the right to question God – to question anyone. And for what feels like the first time I start asking questions.

My husband is a lawyer and we have an agreement: He doesn't tell me what to do with my career; I don't tell him what to do with his. Every now and again he tries to make small suggestions, and I'm like, babe, you don't know the industry, I got this.

One evening we sit in a cool bar in downtown LA., a table set apart from the crowd in a little loft space. We hear the sounds of wine glasses clinking, celebrating achievements and goals. Eager patrons try to grab the attention of the bartender to order their drink. But it's all just background noise. Grant and I are locked into a serious conversation, not caring about what surrounds us.

I decide to ask him, point blank: "Why do you think country music isn't working out for me?" I've never asked him this question. Never.

He replies, "Because you're running from everything that makes you different. You're a country singer who can also be on R&B stations. You can be at the Essence Festival.

You can be at Black Girls Rock. And you can equally be in the country music world because you are country. You need to sing songs that are true to you, not to everybody else.”

I’m floored by this. Because I instantly know he’s right.

I’ve spent my whole life running away from everything that’s makes me different, listening to everyone else, trying to constantly fit in, trying to be accepted, always a yes person.

But no more. Now, I am going to sing about being a Black woman – because that really is my experience. That’s what I’ve lived. I am never not conscious of being a Black person. And more than that, a Black woman. It affects me everyday. It shapes me.

The biggest breakthrough for me in my career and my life comes when I accept and embrace who I am. Until now I’ve spent my whole life just trying to kind of fit in, always trying to be everything to everybody else.

“Oh, you need to get rid of your label. Oh, you need to get new management. Oh, you need to change your look. Your sound. All of the above.” But I realize that the first step toward healing is to not look for someone to blame, it’s to start asking questions that allow me to find my own voice: a Black woman singing country music.

When I was 6, when my mother put that old dresser in front of the doorway – I could easily have climbed out of the room. But I didn’t take the risk. I was afraid. It’s been the same with my own music. I’ve hindered myself so many times, in so many ways, from actually flying because of my own fear. But now I make the music that is the truest to me.

Don’t get me wrong, I still do a lot of listening. But now, I embrace everything that makes me different. It’s allowed me to find my voice, and I show others how to listen to me and hear it. I have my choir all around me: my manager, my label, the producers, my husband. Even my mom. And I teach them how to harmonize with me. They trust my instincts. And together, well, ain’t that just a beautiful sound.

GUNATILLAKE: Thank you, Mickey. In just a moment, I’ll guide you through a closing meditation.

It’s the moment in Mickey’s story that really gets me. At the bar with her husband she stops, says no. No more. She is going to stop running, turn and face things as they are, and sing about the truths of her experience as a Black woman.

It’s like in the Matrix, when Neo appears defeated but he gets up, says No, and when the bullets start flying, they fall to the ground. Mickey has her Neo moment. Her awakening.

So let's play with that idea in our short meditation together. Giving permission to the body to be soft. Encouraging softness, pliability in the mind. Who am I? Dropping the question into the bodymind. And listening, fully, to what answer arises. Inhabiting the answer fully.

Breathing. Whole body breathing. Resetting. Asking the question again. Who am I?

Dropping the words into a curious mind. Noticing what arises. And noticing any resistance or confusion or distraction that is here too. Letting that go if you can. Saying no. Who am I? Asking the question, listening to the answer, saying no to what needs to be said no to and inhabiting what remains.

There are countless books and posts which talk about being authentic. But in my years of meditation, this is what has served me most: Being interested in what this thing called me is, asking the question, listening, saying no, and asking again.

Thank you Mickey for your voice and your voice. And thank you for trusting us with your attention, it means a lot to us. We will no longer watch from the shadows. We can not. We must not. Go well.