

## Meditative Story Transcript – Stephen Wilkes

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**STEPHEN WILKES:** Taking photographs demands attention – keeps me in the moment. When I take a picture, I'm completely immersed in the moment. I don't just look; I see. I engage with the world so completely as to mute whatever story I'm otherwise telling myself. But if I listen to the voice in my head, the voice that tells me I'm less than, strange or incapable, I'll miss something vital and magical right in front of me.

**ROHAN GUNATILLAKE:** Photographer Stephen Wilkes is perhaps best known for creating evocative composite images that capture the passage of time within a single frame – a unique approach that requires patient, sustained observation, and a sensitivity to subtle changes in light and perspective.

Stephen's early passion for photography unlocks something in him, helping him transcend the ghosts of his family's past by teaching him to turn his gaze outward when powerful emotions threaten to consume him.

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.

**WILKES:** I tilt my head up to take a look at the grand brick building. Huge columns tower above me. No one has explained anything to us, or prepared us for what's about to happen.

It's the first day of kindergarten. My brother Donald and I are identical twins. The school isn't quite sure what to do with us, so we're kept together.

Coming into the classroom I see huge windows; light is filtering through the large shades that hang from each window. Maps cover one wall, letters of the alphabet on another. The desks and chairs are wooden. They're worn, and heavy. I feel the grain against my fingers. Everything here feels so old.

I feel like everyone here knows something that I don't. What are the rules so I don't get into trouble? I see the teacher's mouth move but I don't hear her. It's like the room's gone quiet, and all the noise is coming from inside my head.

I feel better at playtime. I notice colored blocks in bright Lifesaver colors beneath the table. I crawl under and begin to arrange them into different patterns, like a puzzle.

As I play with these blocks, the noise in my head quiets down. I don't notice that the floor underneath me is cold and hard, or that my legs are getting stiff. The act of moving these blocks around, mixing the colors, rearranging the order – blue, yellow, green; green, red, and blue – it soothes me.

My brother and I know Mom's story by heart, but even so, I find it chilling to picture: It's 1939, she is nine years old, four years older than we are now. She waits for hours on a bench. She's in the Great Hall on Ellis Island in New York Harbor awaiting her aunt and uncle to come and collect her.

Everything she owns is sewn into a teddy bear. She doesn't speak English. Though she's surrounded by refugees like herself, she's very much alone.

Even now, as Mom sits beside us at the kitchen table, I can sense that a part of her still remains on Ellis Island. Her body is here, but her spirit is elsewhere. Sometimes Donald and I come home from school to discover she's been hospitalized, again.

Between spells, though, she is our emotional anchor – a model of what it means to be empathetic, loving. And above all she is tough. Mom is a survivor. She's incredibly resilient.

Warm weather tends to trigger Mom's episodes – the brighter it gets outside, the darker she becomes. I'm always on the edge of my seat in the spring and the summer, knowing she could have another major spell.

When she has an event, she suddenly clutches her pocketbook like a teddy bear, protecting it, refusing to put it down. I sit with her at the table and talk, remind her I'm here, that everything's okay.

Dad travels a lot for work and often leaves town just when Mom's episodes begin. So from an early age it falls on us to manage Mom's illness. Each time he returns, I can see the hope on his face as he walks through the door. Hope that something might be different this time, that Mom will be better. The disappointment is hard for him to handle. It's the same as it is for us.

Dad's childhood was also difficult. When he was nine, he lost his older sister to appendicitis. He has difficulty expressing his love to us. He doesn't express affection – no hugs, no kisses.

There's a tension in the house. Dad wants Mom to come back, to be here, to be present for us – and for him. He raises his voice and all his pent-up anger fills the air. But it doesn't help; it only makes my mother go further into darkness. At night, I put a pillow over my head to fall asleep – but the noise in my head gets even louder.

Mom finds solace in music – in opera. She studied voice at Juilliard, left music behind when she started a family. When she sings, it's as if she is transported to another place, another time – somewhere deep in her past where she feels safe.

Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" is her favorite. When she steps into the living room to perform for us, she's in full costume, totally embodying this character. Her voice is pitch-perfect, so powerful. My brother believes she can shatter glass. And when she sings, her sadness, her illness, and the pressures of the home drop away.

I find it difficult to focus at school. My brother is the same way. Teachers lose patience with us. Our minds drift, and we're easily distracted. We're a challenge – hyperactive, they say.

We're put on Ritalin, held back in third grade. As identical twins we're conspicuous in the schoolyard. Our classmates think there's something wrong with us, and they call us names. We're made to feel less-than.

One bright autumn morning on my walk to school, I'm suddenly struck by the way the sun comes through leaves, rays of golden light reaching out to me like fingers. I feel the wind caress my face. I become engaged with the dappled shadows and patterns on the ground. I see my surroundings in a totally different way – clearer and more beautiful than I can remember. There's something magical and new about this moment of seeing. It's vivid and alive. All that pain and anxiety I carry with me from the house disappears.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Sometimes the simple act of noticing is all it takes to soften the volume in our heads. Letting your senses engage, absorb into everything around you. The dance of movement and light. The temperature of the space you're in right now. No room for commentary. Just this.

**WILKES:** There's a photograph of my brother and me at our Bar Mitzvah I can't stop looking at. My face is on one side of the image, my brother's on the other. His left side and my right mirror each other, perfect reflections. The only light in the picture comes from the faint orange glow of the candles between us. Our features look identical, yet through our eyes, our facial expression, I can see our individuality shine through. I've never been able to quite articulate how I experience the world as a twin. The photo so perfectly captures our essence, something deep and specific.

I want to be seen as I see myself. I beg Mom for a camera and lessons. Rene, the photographer who took our Bar Mitzvah photographs, invites me to assist him on shoots – weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, confirmations. I learn to tell visual stories. And Rene becomes my first mentor.

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the world so completely as to mute whatever story I'm otherwise telling myself. But if I listen to the voice in my head, the voice that tells me I'm less-than, strange, or incapable, I'll miss something vital and magical right in front of me.

I become more and more confident in my ability to capture the essence of people and places through photographs. For the first time in my life, I feel capable. My mom calls me her poet with a camera.

It's not that the distracting thoughts in my head don't matter. They just don't matter *now*. When I take pictures, I give myself permission to leave all of that alone for a while. The act of photographing makes everything go away.

One day, I ask my mother to sit for me. I've just learned about double exposure, layering two images one on top of the other. I take a shot of this beautiful bouquet of tulips, and then I double-expose Mom over them. Because that's what she is to me: an extravagant, gorgeous bouquet, bursting with life, with creativity, with beauty.

I want Mom to see herself like I see her, to feel as I feel, that her beauty is a living thing. It's like an invitation to Mom to meet herself – right now, as she truly is. This person she cannot see.

And I want others to see her like I do, too. To express what I see to others, so that they can experience the world the way I do, and see what I see.

**GUNATILLAKE:** I love these words, an invitation to meet me in the present moment. To make feelings visible. To experience the world the way another feels it. Let's take up that invitation.

**WILKES:** Some years later, through a fortuitous assignment, I begin documenting Ellis Island. This place still plays an outsized role in the mythology of my family's story.

I'm on the south side of the island, in a rusted, vine-covered building that once served as a hospital for patients with infectious disease. The Statue of Liberty looms over my shoulder, yet I feel no less an archeologist than those who had ventured into the first Mayan tombs. And as I meander through its empty corridors, I find the lost shoes of immigrants long forgotten, shards of mirrors, a surreal sculpture of vines, leaves and moss mingled with shattered plaster, curling paint, rusted iron. The architecture is 50 percent the work of man, 50 percent the triumph of nature.

Inside it's damp and cold, suffused with darkness, but for the few wisps of light that poke in through the windows. Virtually no one's been here since it closed in 1954. It feels as if I'm stepping back in time.

The decaying lead paint produces discordant, gorgeous colors and textures on the walls that stand in contrast to the air of suffering here, a kind of dangerous beauty. I want to

capture it with my camera, use the image to tell a story about time, about history, about my mother.

A park ranger accompanies me and my assistant as we walk through Corridor Nine, the so-called spinal cord of the hospital. The corridor is aglow with white light on the right side, yet everything growing from the windows appears dead. On the left side is darkness, yet everything on that side appears alive. Vines burst through broken window panes, pouring downward toward the cement floor below. It feels like an apt metaphor for what happened here on this island, life and death.

From where we stand, the corridor looks a half mile long. The last of the afternoon's sunlight illuminates a doorway at the far end, where the walls seem to converge, surrounding it with a radiant orange glow unlike anything I've ever seen. It lasts only a moment, but I shoot a few frames to capture it.

The next morning, my assistant and I return to the hospital. I go for a walk alone, thinking about what I would like to photograph for the day. I leave my assistant in a ward just off Corridor Nine, as he's focused on setting up my equipment. When I return to the ward, I find my assistant on his knees. He tells me he's just had the strangest feeling that someone was in the room, staring at him from the corner.

I take in the room. The ranger informs us that this room was a measles ward. Hundreds and hundreds of children died here. This hospital ward was the closest they ever got to America. The windows are boarded up behind thick black curtains. Dust swirls in the pockets of light visible through tears in the tattered fabric.

Imagining Mom in this room, I feel an old chill I haven't felt since childhood. And I suddenly understand something about her, the painful past she has carried around since she arrived on this island. Little Ruthie, who doesn't speak English; who fled a war, left an entire world on the other side of the ocean; who sits alone on a bench, waiting to be saved.

I've brought an old pinhole Polaroid camera with me – a turn-of-the-century lens, with no shutter, just a lens cap to take on and off to control the shutter. I remove the cover by hand, and I count for 2 seconds, and then cover the lens, just the way the earliest photographers would have worked. I take one photo, and I pull the paper through the rollers, and that begins to process the Polaroid. While waiting one minute, I nervously rub the print with my hands, hoping to speed up this process. I'm anxious to capture this feeling and energy within this moment. Finally I peel the Polaroid to see the finished image.

I first see only a shaft of light in the photo. But as the Polaroid continues to develop, I can almost make out the shape of a child, a girl standing in the light, the bow neck of a nightgown, hands outstretched, open. I imagine Mom being in a room very much like

this. At that moment, I begin to understand her suffering in a way that she was never able to articulate to me.

Mom could never escape from 1939. She carried the trauma with her every day of her life. Mom's retreat into the past was very painful for me and my brother. While she was functional, loving, and supportive of us, her episodes created a sense of helplessness in our lives. When darkness would fall upon Mom, she would turn inward, leading her to this dark place – again and again.

For me, and perhaps for millions of us, there is a great deal of unresolved energy in these rooms on Ellis Island. I believe there's history in the light that I photograph here, echoes from a moment in time that I've captured with my camera. Children separated from their parents. Tremendous pain. Fear. But in these rooms, I also see hope – for a new life, for a second chance, and for love.

Through photography, I've learned to orient my gaze outward – to create metaphors that reframe my experiences, allowing me to view them with compassion, rather than be absorbed by them, like Mom was. Looking outward, I quiet my anxiety, instead of turning inward and feeding it. I heal the trauma of my history. And I free myself to create a future of my own.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Here at Meditative Story we've had the enormous fortune to host a few photographers as our storytellers, and what they offer is so great. Maybe it's because as photographers they know so much about attention, about being present, about ways of seeing.

So for our closing meditation together, here's one inspired by the time when Stephen was learning the technique of double exposure – of layering two different images into one image. In the story, it's the portrait of his mother combined with a bouquet of flowers.

One thing laid over another leading to greater meaning. So that's what we'll do. A double exposure meditation. And starting with the body. Not this time dropping our attention into anywhere in particular. Instead, letting your awareness rest with the sense of the whole body. The whole sense of the body. The whole physical sense, all of it. All sensations held within this frame.

Take a moment to give that a try, if it doesn't come so naturally.

No need to get caught up in any particular sensation or any one part of the body. Instead, making the whole the most important thing. This is the first image. It is also the frame.

So while staying present with this sense of touch, while keeping part of your awareness with this frame, bring to mind the image from Stephen's story which you remember most.

It could be one from the challenges of his early school life and dealing with his mother's health issues. Or that magical moment, when being so present with the world around him made all his pain drop away.

It could be that time taking the portrait of his mother which he'd go on to combine with the tulips, seeing his mother in a way that no one else did. Or that extraordinary adventure through the abandoned facility on Ellis Island. Whatever it is – one of those or something else entirely – hold it in your mind.

Bringing that moment, that image to mind, however works for you. While at the same time resting in the overall awareness of the body, grounding you to the present. Past and present united. Stephen's story and your experience right now. Noticing the connection between them. Not one, not two.

Your sense of body, an image from Stephen's story. Not one, not two.

Okay. So as we wrap up, let's set an intention together. Either for the rest of the day, or for tomorrow, if it's late already. Let's see if we can bring some photographer energy, some photographer mind. Bright awareness. A wide frame but also a sense for detail. A way of looking that brings it all to life.

Thank you, Stephen, and thank you.