

Meditative Story Transcript – Nate Berkus

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NATE BERKUS: I push open the old wooden door into the empty, unfinished side of our basement. The concrete floor is a dark, mottled gray. Cinder blocks line the walls. In one corner, exposed pipes extend from floor to ceiling. There's a small window on the far wall, high up enough that if I jump, I can just see the grass of our front lawn.

For most people, this room would be unremarkable. The universal unfinished basement. But my eyes are wide as I take in the space. I'm overwhelmed by the possibilities.

What if those drab cinder blocks were covered with bright wallpaper? What if there was a big splash of red on that wall? What if there was a bed there and a dresser there and a bathroom over there?

I can see my future coming to life right in front of me. A future that I'm going to have some control over.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Nate Berkus is an interior designer, a bestselling author, and one of Oprah Winfrey's longtime collaborators. In today's Meditative Story, Nate opens the door to his childhood bedroom. To the specific moment where self-discovery springs to life from an empty basement space. Designing our lives inside of the spaces that unexpectedly open up can be magical. I think you'll really enjoy this Meditative Story about what happens when you reshape the environment around you.

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.

BERKUS: Mom talks on the phone while she cooks dinner. A bottle of pasta sauce and a box of store-bought spaghetti sit on the kitchen counter. A pot of water boils on the stove. The steam unfurls just above the rim and then vanishes in its escape. The super long telephone cord wraps around the butcher block and stretches taut across the room until it can be pulled no further.

I stand, waiting, under the hanging copper pots.

She's the one who called me in here, five minutes ago, but she's still on the phone.

Mom says, "Bye," hangs up the phone on the wall, and turns to me.

She smiles.

“Dad and I were talking, and we think we're going to turn the basement into a room for you. You're old enough now that you don't need to share a room with your brother any more.”

The air in the room shifts.

My mind lights up in full alert. I think, “Please don't take this back. Please don't take this away. Please let this be really what is happening right now.”

My stomach tenses. Did I hear this right? I get a word out, shakily: “Really?”

“Really,” she says. “For your bar mitzvah, we're going to build out a bedroom and a bathroom for you in the basement, and I'm going to let you have a real say in what you want it to look like.”

I never even thought to wish for this.

I've always noticed the details in homes. The furniture, the decorations, the layout, the flow. Once when I was sleeping over at a friend's house, I rearranged their entire living room before his mom came home. Mrs. Swartz was a bit disoriented and less than thrilled.

But I never imagined I'd actually be able to help design a space that I get to live in. By myself.

I walk over and give mom a hug so big I almost knock her into the stove. Then I turn around, cross the kitchen, and bolt downstairs to survey my domain.

The stairs from our kitchen down to our basement are steep. They're covered in red, low-pile industrial carpet in case of flooding. The walls are wood paneled, in cedar.

I hop down the stairs three at a time, vaulting off the wood railing with my right hand. I push open the old door into the empty, unfinished side of our basement. The concrete floor is a dark, mottled gray. Cinder blocks line the walls. In one corner, exposed pipes extend from the floor to the ceiling. There's a small window on the far wall, high up enough that if I jump, I can just see the grass of our front lawn.

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GUNATILLAKE: Intellectually, we all know that there are many possibilities available in any moment, many routes that could open up, but it can be hard to see that in practice. Take a couple of very deliberate breaths, letting them be long. Enjoying the exhalation. Now, in any space that may have been created, think about something that might have just opened up for you, and how you can make it your own.

BERKUS: But tonight, I still have to sleep in the room that I share with my little brother, Jesse. It's on the second floor of the house at the end of a long hallway. It's the last door on the right.

Anyone who walks in says it's a nice-looking kids' room. Oak bunk beds, two matching dressers, cool striped wallpaper, wooden shades. After all, mom is an interior designer. She picked everything out.

I probably would have made some different choices for myself, but the problem is not the room – it's Jesse. Why does a 13-year-old have to live with a 7-year-old? He's just dirty. As a person. He always has dirt under his fingernails, and he has a dusty neck. He's like Mowgli from the *Jungle Book*, which is to say he's normal. And I'm not.

I sit on the top bunk reading. My legs dangle over the edge. The bed's made, as always. Blue comforter, stylishly tucked and folded with my mismatched primary color pillows. Everything's crisp and clean. Inside my dresser are neatly folded stacks of clothes, each in their proper drawer.

Jesse's bunk is the opposite of clean. The bedding is a mess. There's a smell. His dirty clothes are strewn all over the floor. The drawers of his dresser hang open, completely empty. I can't believe I have to sleep above this slob. It's an unlivable situation. Luckily, for the first time, the end is in sight.

My mother lets me make some of my own decisions for the basement room. I give these choices absolutely everything I've got. She asks me what type of carpet I want. It's a huge decision. I choose charcoal gray carpet with black dots.

The color of the countertops in the bathroom? I choose gray Formica, and it feels like a revolution.

The wallpaper in the bathroom? A monumental decision. I don't want to rush it.

I go into mom's home office, and I use two hands to pick up her wallpaper swatch book from her desk. It's enormous. I don't know why a wallpaper book needs to be the size of our microwave and weigh 1,500 pounds.

I lug the book into the family room. Mom's sitting on the leather couch, and I plop down next to her. I sink deep into the cushions under the weight of it.

I look for inspiration. I heave one page over, and then another, until I've flipped through about two-thirds of it. I turn over one more page and a sample catches my eye: white wallpaper with a red broken stripe.

Suddenly the look of the whole basement starts to come together for me. Red, white, gray, and black. A room the color of my favorite breakdancing outfit.

Mom says, "Are you sure you want to lock yourself into red and white?" I pause. I take a breath. I look up at her and say, "I'm sure." There's a tingle in my chest as I say it. Standing my ground here feels important. She says, "You're going to get tired of this." I say, "It's my bathroom, and you said I could pick it." She sighs. "Fine. I'm never going in there."

All the better, I think. My bathroom. My bedroom. My choices. Me.

The first time I walk down into my very own room, I feel like... this is it, I've arrived.

I start experimenting with everything.

Sure, the bed is against the front-facing wall right now but what if I moved it to that other wall, facing east? How would it feel right in the center of the room, not touching any walls at all?

My good friends stop wanting to sleep over because I'm always like, "Come on, just pick up that side of the bed. I want to see what this would look like on the other wall."

One day, I take Fun-Tak and stick little mirrors to the ceiling above my bed. Another time, I make a canopy out of one of my red and white sheets.

The contractor custom-builds my dresser, my shelves, and my desk – right into the wall. They're unmovable. It's cool, like living in a spaceship.

But even those are places to put things. I start going to a lot of garage sales with my mom.

I bike a mile and a half, on my own, to the multi-dealer antiques mall near the center of town. It's 5,000 square feet, with 35,000 objects for sale. It's overwhelming and exciting at the same time.

I walk into an older man's crowded little shop that calls to me as I pass by. He's got these little eyeglasses and a carefully trimmed beard. I ask him to open up his large glass case for me.

I ask to see a decorative box with a hunting scene on it, in a sort of decoupage. I ask to see a brass horn. I ask to see an old English snuff box.

And so it begins: this permission for me to start collecting. To start putting my taste forward. To pick what speaks to me.

Before this room, what was I going to do: buy an old brass candlestick and put it in my desk at school, or under my bed in a room that I shared with my little brother? Now I can buy, within reason, the things that I want to allow into my room and into my life. I start to discover what I like. I start to discover who I am.

Biking back home, my backpack is a little heavier. But as the crisp, early-autumn air rushes across my face, I feel like I'm flying.

GUNATILLAKE: Heavier but lighter at the same time. Relax your shoulders, and wherever your hands are, can they be soft and steady, as Nate's are on his handlebars? Imagine a steady flow of cool air on your face. Just imagine.

BERKUS: I have known that I'm gay since I was six years old. More than half my life, at this point. But I don't want everyone to know, so I have to lie – in a lot of little ways all the time. I have to lie about what I'm interested in. I have to lie about the way I even move. I have to act like I don't care too much about my hair or my clothes.

I have to lie about what I'd rather do on a Saturday afternoon. I don't want to play t-ball. And I definitely have to lie about how much I care about interior decorating. Mom has friends who are gay designers. But I'm afraid to show too much enthusiasm for it outside the house. There's no hiding my excitement completely, but I'm careful not to talk about it too much with my friends at school.

I can control what items and which people come into my room in the basement. In this room, I have the freedom and privacy to be myself.

Whenever I have a breakthrough with my bedroom's design – which is at least once a week – I do a big reveal for my mother. I create a whole ceremony. But first, I need my audience.

I stand at the top of my stairs and call to my mom, wherever she is in the house. And I hear, “Just a minute!”

A minute later I shout again. I hear, “Sorry, hon, I’m on the phone.” Or, “I’m cooking dinner.” Or maybe worst of all: “I’m in the middle of balancing my checkbook.” Who would rather balance their checkbook than witness a room that’s been turned into a masterpiece?

After enough trying, I eventually convince mom to come downstairs. I tell her to stand on the landing at the bottom of the stairs, right outside my door. I’m waiting inside the room. I say, “Are you ready?” And I open the door as if on the other side of that door was the Grand Canal of Venice or the ancient Roman ruins of Baalbek.

Mom sees a gray laminate platform bed that used to be pushed against one wall, now perpendicular to that wall. With the same nightstand that used to be next to it, now flipped to the other side. And the desk lamp on the nightstand as opposed to on the desk.

To me, these changes are monumental. She does her best to “ooh” and “aah.” I point out that there’s also a new, small decorative box with a hunting scene on it on one of my shelves. She says, “That’s great, Nate. Really nice.” I’m sure she wants to be proud and encouraging. But this is literally what she does for a living. She is completely and utterly bored.

The thing is: Her reaction doesn’t slow me down. My mom gives me everything I need by giving me this space. Down here, I’m discovering my own power. My own vision. I’m discovering the joy that comes from being able to make a decision and then see how it comes to fruition. I will never tire of this.

This room, this experimentation, this design, this self-discovery – it’s only for me. As she walks back up the stairs, I fall back onto the bed – my bed.

I’m a dad now. My husband and I have two kids, a son and a daughter. We continually scan for clues to see what lights them up, and then we feed that light in the same way my mom did for me.

These children of ours will become who they are meant to be, and my gift to them is to notice – to see what they walk toward, and to open up the space for them to forge their path. I try to just hack away at the undergrowth a little.

Our daughter is five. She’s starting to take riding lessons. I’ve never really liked horses. But she does. After her lesson every Saturday, we talk about it: Why she likes it. What it means to her. If she wants to continue. She gives these questions a lot of thought.

One Saturday afterwards, we're sitting in our kitchen. I ask her what it feels like to be a little kid on a big horse. She finishes chewing a big bite before answering. I choose not to fill the silence.

"Daddy," she says. "It feels like being part of the world."

I know that feeling. I love that feeling. I sign her up for more lessons.

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

Nate being given the chance to make the basement his own reminded me of when I first got into meditation. Learning the foundational techniques of mindfulness, it was like I'd been given the keys to a whole new part of myself. And I had a new space for experimentation, to try things, to see what worked. And like Nate, to learn who I was. For me it was looking inside, and through that looking, to understand who I was in the world. For Nate, it was through playing with the space around him that he too started to understand more about himself.

That's part of what we're trying to do with Meditative Story. The stories and the meditations and mindfulness techniques running through them. Things to play with and enjoy. Noticing which ones we resonate and connect with and what is happening in our wider lives when we do. Leaning into practices that make us most clearly feel part of the world.

So for our short meditation time, let's go with that sense of play and experimentation. And start by placing our attention, our awareness, deep inside the body. The obvious place for me as I speak to you is for my attention to be deep in my chest. That means that right now it's almost as if I can feel the movements of my heart.

Eyes open or closed. Whichever is best for you.

The idea here is to rest our awareness as deep in the body as we can. Not forcing it, but gently placing, dropping even, the awareness deep inside and letting it hang out there.

Maybe in the heart region, the belly, the bones. Whatever makes sense for you.

And noticing what this feels like. What the tone of it is. Pleasant. Not pleasant. Not quite sure. Dropping deep into the body and noticing the tone of that, the flavor of that.

OK, let's move things around a bit. Try things in a different direction, and see how they feel.

Instead of letting the attention collect in, let's point it out.

Again, eyes open or closed, no matter. Now let's open our attention out and rest it with hearing. Interested in what the furthest away sound we can hear is.

Not straining with the awareness, instead just opening it out and letting faraway sounds come to us.

Inviting the outside in. Opening out to far away sound.

And again, noticing what this feels like, its flavor, its tone. Pleasant, unpleasant, something in between. No pressure. Just reaching out with our awareness through hearing. Out beyond the sounds of my voice to allow the faraway in. And noticing how that makes you feel.

So we've tried two related techniques. One where we've placed our awareness very internally, and one where we placed our awareness very externally.

Which one felt most natural to you today? Most comfortable, least alien? Whether it was dropping in or opening out, let's do it for a few breaths to close off. Going with what feels most comfortable. Being part of the world, the world within or the world without. No difference.

Wonderful, I hope you enjoyed that.

So thank you. And thank you again, Nate

Before we close, I want you to know that one of the original creators of Meditative Story and a dear friend of mine, Jai Punjabi, is embarking on a new adventure to adapt our content for television, and we just want to take this moment. Right now and pause. Thank you Jai for your creativity and endless hours breathing life into Meditative Story from its very beginning. We are so excited to be part of this next leg of your journey with you.