

Meditative Story Transcript – Brian and Scott Nicholson

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BRIAN NICHOLSON: Nobody knows what's happening. I hear buzzes and the pings of everyone else's phones. Everyone's getting texts. Everyone seems worried. And we can see audience members walking on the sidewalk next to us, crying, and holding their pink balloons. One guy says, "I saw it. I heard a boom."

I look at Scotty and don't say anything.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: When it comes to superstars, Ariana Grande is pretty much as big as it gets. And having spent the last decade working with Ariana as choreographers, creative directors, and dancers, identical twins Scott and Brian Nicholson are pretty much as good as they come. Not only have Scott and Brian danced along Ariana in some of the most iconic music videos and performances of recent years, they also just happen to be big fans of Meditative Story – as we discovered in our recent listener survey. What a community we have.

We are always careful about the topics we curate for Meditative Story. From time to time, there are tough moments we include in the story journey if we believe it deepens connection on the other side. With that in mind, today Brian and Scott share a Meditative Story that rises up from the terrorist attack at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester four years ago. Not sure about you, but I remember it very well. This is a story of connection and solidarity between artists and their fans that runs deep. And in a first for us, Scott and Brian tell this story together.

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

BRIAN NICHOLSON: Backstage before the show, I'm emotional. All of us, the dancers, we're all looking at each other crying. Everyone's nervous of what's to come, what could happen. And could it happen, again?

SCOTT NICHOLSON: Brian and I can see the crowd through the little gaps in the curtain. A lot of people are wearing the One Love Manchester merch that Brian designed on his phone, based on the city's street art scene. The fans are chanting "Ari, Ari." The

air, the breeze, it's so crisp and beautiful, and we're all in this gorgeous outdoor soccer stadium—

BRIAN NICHOLSON: —or I guess they say, football stadium.

SCOTT NICHOLSON: We take our spots with the band. Then the first eight dancers walk onto the stage, get into position, pose, and then freeze. The energy's building, building, and building.

BRIAN NICHOLSON: Then Ari, Scotty, and I walk from the back of the stage, one of us on either side of her.

We're identical twins, and we're kinda like this mirror image of protective energy around Ariana. We're also kind of like a stereo amplifying her energy.

We look at the 55,000 people packed into an open-air stadium as far as we can see. Four hundred feet out, there's a second wall of speaker monitors — and beyond that, there seems like there's another whole concert of people. It seems like this huge mass of humanity. People everywhere. The usual barriers between the crowd and the performers, they've all melted away.

SCOTT NICHOLSON: I can't help but think back to the first time we performed with stakes that felt so high ... on a much smaller stage in front of a much smaller audience.

We're seniors in high school.

My Grandma comes over to our house right before breakfast to ask us to perform our show choir duet we've been working on — now for grandpa.

Me and My Shadow, by Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. Grandpa is sick, and he's now at hospice at home.

I say, "You want us to do what?" But my grandma knows him best. She knows how much he wanted to be a performer.

So I find Brian in our bedroom. And I say, "Brian, get your cane. It's showtime." We both smile. Neither of us laughs.

BRIAN NICHOLSON: We grab our top hats and our black jackets. While Mom rounds up the whole entire family — aunts and uncles included.

So our grandparents have two living rooms, his and hers. And his room is off the kitchen that normally has his recliner, but they've now replaced it with a hospital bed. Two big windows. Everything in the room is green, a dark, dark green.

SCOTT NICHOLSON: An absolutely disgusting dark green carpet.

BRIAN NICHOLSON: I love it. It's awesome.

It's not a ton of room. But the moves are real simple, just a little arm out, look left, look right. And most of the space is taken up by our aunts and uncles, our mom and our grandma.

That performance is ... soft, beautiful. My grandpa is mostly gone, but he opens his eyes once or twice while we're singing and dancing.

It's a gift for him for all of us to be together like this. We all know this is may be the last thing he will ever see.

GUNATILLAKE: It's a beautiful scene, in different ways. The earnest exuberance of the boys. Their love of family. The air. The colors. Take a deep breath. And another if you like. Stay with me here for a moment.

SCOTT NICHOLSON: OK, so six years later we're working with Ariana Grande.

We rent a dance studio at the Millennium Dance Complex in Los Angeles to rehearse her new song called "Be Alright."

So, we sit on shiny wood floors. There's a crisp AC blowing through the air but it's musty. There's a dried-sweat smell that just screams, "Oh, there's people dancing in here absolutely nonstop." I hear someone rehearsing in a tiny vocal room right next to ours, and it's a choreographer shouting and clapping, "one, two, three four, again – from the top."

BRIAN NICHOLSON: Ariana told us that for this set that she wanted to celebrate voguing with this song. So for us, voguing is about embodiment, being free, being there for each other, and showing off the garment, your body, movement, and yourself. It's a fluid fusion of feminine and masculine energy mashed up all together. It's about openness, equality, unity, inclusivity between all the genders, non-binary folks, LGBTQIA+, and even straight.

I want kids to see themselves in this choreography and to be able to say, "See, Mom and Dad, there are people like me on TV. Maybe you'll be able to accept me like this".

SCOTT NICHOLSON: Okay, so we walk the dancers through all of our ideas. A lot of choreographers will just say, "Here's a step, bye, go do it ... do your thing." But for us, we're like, "Oh, you're looking at the sun, let it in, feel it on your face, open up your chest gem, and let it in."

BRIAN NICHOLSON: We walk everyone through the most important part of the song, the part that starts with: “Baby, don’t you know, all them tears gonna come and go...”

And Scotty gets up to talk to the dancers.

Scotty says, “Imagine that you have makeup on your face. And then while actually touching your face, you start to wipe it off. So wipe your brow, wipe your tear, wipe your lip, now flick it off. You want to simulate that you’re wiping off this exterior, whether it be a face that you put on, or what people think of you. Or even an emotion that you want to philosophically or spiritually just wipe off.

“So the tears are going down, and then the sun’s rising, your arms are rising with the sun, and then your hand is flexed as if it’s a mirror, and then Ariana sings, Scotty sing with me, “Baby you just gotta make up your mind that every little thing is going to be alright.”

We debut the choreography on our birthday, on *Saturday Night Live*, and it gets an amazing reaction, like “Whoooa.” After this performance, Ari, Scott, and I are putting a lot of thought into her upcoming Dangerous Woman tour. I get a little of that “Wow” feeling when Ariana tells us that we’re going to start each show with “Be Alright.”

SCOTT NICHOLSON: So, for the fourth show of our European leg, we play Manchester, England, on a Saturday late in May 2017. It’s a huge stadium, filled with enough people to fill a small city, all shoulder to shoulder. The fans’ energy is absolutely amazing, and even before the show starts, I know it’s going to be incredible. As it ends, we’re covered in sweat, as always, and the kids in the crowd start grabbing pink balloons as take home souvenirs.

Afterwards we usually wait by a big, huge door inside the arena that opens up to bring us to our tour bus.

So tonight, we’re waiting a bit longer than usual. There’s a commotion outside. The person who’s supposed to meet us there isn’t there. And my brother Brian says, “Something’s not right.”

BRIAN NICHOLSON: And that’s when I say to Scotty: “We should leave the building and take the dancers across the street.”

SCOTT NICHOLSON: We open the door, I smell the industrial air of the arena mixing with the beautiful evening air of the city. The fresh sweat, soap, and lotion smell of all the dancers.

The wheels of our rolly luggage grind and crunch as we cross the small two-lane side street, and we move into a gravel parking lot on the other side. And wait.

BRIAN NICHOLSON: Nobody knows what's happening. I hear buzzes and the pings of everyone else's phones. Everyone's getting texts. Everyone seems worried. We see audience members walking by us on the sidewalk next to us, crying, holding their pink balloons.

One guy says, "I saw it. I heard a boom."

One of our lighting guys says, "Why are we here? With the entire crew? We're sitting ducks."

I look at Scotty and don't say anything. I hear the sound of the gravel really loudly in my ears.

SCOTT NICHOLSON: Two little girls and their mom walk by. And the girls are glassy-eyed, shocked-like, but when they see us, they're like. "Oh my gosh, Scott and Brian!"

I feel my voice go into normal post-show performer mode, talking to the fans. "Hi, how are you? Did you enjoy the show?" And the girls say "Yeah," but the mom just looks at us with this dazed kind of expression and keeps rushing her kids towards the car. I see splotches of blood on her shirt. And I look away.

My phone then buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and see our friend Lindsay had just texted. It says "Are you guys okay? I hear there's a bombing."

I texted back, "We're OK." Not knowing what she was talking about.

But that's when it hits me. "Call Mom. Right now. Call Mom." So I call our mom, and I was like, "No idea what's going on. But Brian and I are safe. I love you. And we're fine."

I hang up because I can't hold it together any longer than that.

BRIAN NICHOLSON: When we finally get onto the tour bus, it all starts to sink in what had happened. We check in with all the dancers. And we drive into the darkness, onto the highway. We all try to be really supportive and beautiful and careful with each other. But after a few minutes, we all fall completely silent.

We hear ambulances and sirens flying past us in the other direction – every 20 minutes for the entire four-hour ride from Manchester to London.

The next two weeks feel like a couple of months.

GUNATILLAKE: Let's just breathe again. This time, acknowledge whatever is coming up for you. It's OK. Be very conscious of your breaths. Connect with the sensations of your feet on the ground. Place your hand on your heart if you wish. You know what you need, so do that.

SCOTT NICHOLSON: The terrible news continues to come in: 23 people are killed and 800 injured.

There are three more attacks during these two weeks in the UK. Whenever we go outside, the warning boards and loudspeakers are blaring, "Please be aware of your surroundings."

Every day, we're checking in with our family and of course with Ari. She's like our sister. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

For a while, we're all saying, "We all need time. We need to give people the time to grieve. The people and the nation just need some time."

BRIAN NICHOLSON: Five or six days after the concert, we're in our hotel room, this super angular room with a floor-to-ceiling window and with salmon drapes and gold tassels up on top. We're FaceTiming with Ari. And we're sitting on this big white bed.

It is clear to Scott and me. Terrorists want us all to be scared. Instead, we're going to step forward. It'll be an act of solidarity, but more than that, it'll be an act of love. We call the show One Love Manchester.

Ari says, "Brian and Scott, what should we open with?" And before we even have time to think, we three collectively say: "Be Alright."

On that day performing, it's not just Ari and our Dangerous Woman tour crew showing love to Manchester. Tons of artists join us: Pharrell, Miley Cyrus, Coldplay, Stevie Wonder, Katy Perry, Bieber, and Little Mix. People are watching from around the world.

Backstage before the show, I'm filled with emotions. All the dancers, we're looking at each other with an unspoken sense of connection, and yes, fear. We can't help but be nervous about what's to come.

Ari, Scott, and I enter from the back and slowly make our way to the front of the stage. The crowd roars as we form a line with the other dancers. We grasp hands, interlocked in a line, for one beautiful moment.

55,000 people. It's still light out so we can see every face within 400 to 500 feet. Lots of glitter. Lots of people – very emotional – tears falling for many of them. There's a long

runway going out into the crowd, and that whole area is filled with fans who had attended that Manchester concert that night and got free tickets to come back, with their families.

SCOTT NICHOLSON: I'm absolutely overwhelmed by what it means for these fans – and our crew and us – to be back. Can you imagine? Just two weeks after. They choose to come. We choose to come. Their parents are letting them come. It's just beautiful.

As soon as we stand there in a line, the music starts. Those chimes. *Don don don don*. Then there's the pause. And then the *don don don don*. We hold. We all look at each other. There's a cymbal crash, and then the piece begins.

The audience is screaming. We're crying and beaming as we dance. They see us. We see them. We're just connected ... fully.

BRIAN NICHOLSON: When we get to the most memorable part of the choreography. The moves are so simple. Wipe your brow, wipe your tear, wipe your lip, flick it off. But this time, we actually have tears in our eyes to wipe off. And the audience is doing the choreography with us, just like they always do.

We're all trying hard to do what the song says: be alright. All the fans. All the dancers. Ari. All the artists that flew in to join us on this stage. Everyone around the world who's watching from home.

I look over at Ariana. She feels like our sister, like our third twin. She's our little five-foot-something powerhouse. I can't help but think about the weight she has to carry on those slim shoulders.

I see the emotion overtake her – and all of us. We collectively lean on the crowd to help us sing the words – to support us. They know every word, and they all sing louder, and louder, carrying us. This song, on this night ... belongs to all of us.

SCOTT NICHOLSON: This show is so beautiful. It's special and healing. And then it's over.

But all of us who share that experience, we're bonded in a way that will live on.

Two years after the attack, Brian and I are in Manchester again, teaching a dance class. And a lot of great young professional dancers come out. So we're about to start when Josh, the event organizer, pops his head in and says, "Hey, there's a boy upstairs, he's a fan, and he wants to meet us."

I say, "Awesome, send him down!"

He says, "We'll have to meet him upstairs. He's in a wheelchair."

BRIAN NICHOLSON: So Scotty and I jog up the stairs to see him. He's 10 but looks younger. Pretty frail. But the second he sees us, this huge smile takes over his face.

We say hi to his mom. And I know it before he tells me: He was there. His mom, who's standing next to him, probably took him to the concert that night.

The boy gives us some letters and some drawings he's made. We hug him. And we ask him about his favorite songs. I can't get over how much he still loves the music.

SCOTT NICHOLSON: We'll never forget that kid. We'll always be connected. Forever bonded. He's a part of us now.

And here's where we could pull out the song title and say we're gonna be alright. But it's not always that simple. That fateful night, so many lives were lost – other lives were changed forever, our life was changed forever. A city changed forever.

BRIAN NICHOLSON: But somehow, for those who survived, our hearts beat stronger. The music remains – the choreography lives on. It lifts us up, together.

GUNATILLAKE: Thank you, Brian, and thank you, Scott.

Two years or so ago, I was taking part in a conference in London about mindfulness, education, and young people. And one of the speakers was this girl. Emily had got into mindfulness when she was 13, and two years later, survived the attack at Manchester Arena that Brian and Scott speak about so beautifully.

In her talk, there was life and vulnerability, strength, and great wisdom. Love and love. So for our closing meditation together, we'll do one themed on those qualities, which were so clear in her, and that so blew me away. It's also a meditation on twins, Scott and Brian's story, a reflection of the teaching she shared with the conference that day.

The twin qualities we'll start with are ones you may recognize. Normally I call them alertness and relaxation. Qualities to express in the body, which can then in turn influence the mind. But today, let's call them aliveness and softness.

So please. Encouraging aliveness in the body. And nudging ourselves there further by inviting sensitivity into how our body is. Noticing vibration. Energy. Dynamism.

And at the same time inviting softness. Softness in the face. The breath. The attention.

Aliveness and softness together. Dancing.

In touch with aliveness and softness at the same time.

Now our second classic pair of qualities, twins which again were so apparent in Brian and Scott's story: wisdom and compassion.

Compassion.

Now we're feeling a bit more open, sensing into, dropping our awareness into the chest region, the area, the space around our heart, into the heart itself. You can place your hand there if you like.

Noticing what's here.

Movement. Tone. Feeling.

Those who are lost. Those who survived. The love that is here.

Wisdom.

The understanding of what has happened.

The reflection. And the skillful action that arises as a result.

Putting on a show in the same city just two weeks later. Moving forward, acknowledging the trauma of the past but giving it the space so that it is not in charge.

Breathing.

Holding wisdom and compassion. Not two, not one. A dance.

Breathing.

Allowing that dance to express itself in you right now.

These two qualities are often spoken about as the two wings of meditation. One is not enough. You need both for the heart to fly. And in balance.

Two wings.

The twins, either side of Ariana on stage. Wisdom and compassion. Identical but not quite.

Thank you Brian, thank you Scott.

As listeners, you may have got a sense of what I do is a bit like choreography too, a choreography of attention. Structures, patterns of movement based on what I think fits the story the best based on my experience.

But the choreography is just the instruction, the magic is in the performance.

So thank you for being here.

I don't know how that was for you, what your own dance was like. But go well, and stay safe.