

Meditative Story Transcript – Joel McHale

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Emmy-winning actor, Joel McHale, rose to fame through his starring role on the long running sitcom *Community*. His wit and sense of irony define his onscreen presence. Offscreen, since the birth of his first son, Eddie, Joel has had to set aside that comedic detachment to engage fully with a world that none of us can truly control. In today's Meditative Story, Joel shares the story of Eddie's difficult first year in the world. And what that experience taught him and his wife, Sarah, about luck, faith, and the unpredictability of life.

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.

McHALE: I'm sitting in a tiny black two-seater convertible. It's a Honda S2000. It is a tiny little car with a motorcycle engine. That's no joke. I'm 6'4", so if I ever got into an accident, my legs would be shoved up into my shoulders. I'm parked outside of an audition at a studio in Los Feliz, California. That's in Los Angeles. It's right near Children's Hospital, there's a script in my hand. And I'm about to go in when my wife, Sarah, calls me. Sarah is at the pediatrician with our two-week old son, Eddie. We're in that parenting phase where it feels like you're at a doctor every other day. But right away, I hear something very different in her voice. And she says, "The doctor said he heard some sort of heart murmur and said, we need to take him to a cardiac specialist right away."

She took a quick breath in, as did I. And she said, "He wrote the directions down on a piece of paper for me, and I am headed there now." Her voice is thin, and it cracks a little bit. And I don't know what to do. Do I go into an audition? It's literally now. My parents are in town, so they go with her. I go to this audition thinking, "Well, if I get this job, then I'll have enough money to pay for what's ever going on with Eddie." In just a few minutes, I'm doing my lines. It is not really in character, because all I'm thinking is, "I need to go home, I need to go home." So when I get home, Eddie's already back from the heart specialist. I walk into the house and see him bouncing in his signature bouncy chair. I pick him up, and I hold on to him. And I listen to his little chest beating, his little heart, and that little pounding. He smells really good.

The cardiologist said that Eddie has two holes in his heart. They're going to need to do surgery. We have to wait until he's five months old, and is bigger, and stronger before we can do that. Because Eddie has struggled with breastfeeding and really any feeding. So we fed him with, like, an eyedropper, like he was a little bird. It seems like all we do is feed him, because they said you have to feed him every four hours around the clock. But the feedings take two hours from beginning to end. So Sarah does the days, while I'm at work. I host a basic cable clip show called *The Soup*. It launched when Sarah was pregnant. And I do the nights with Eddie, sitting on our gray art deco couch, watching endless late night television shows and infomercials on a flat screen TV that is sitting on a coffee table.

And sometimes I fall asleep while it's happening, and there will be milk all over me and Eddie, but he's asleep too. I know how hard the days are for Sarah. And I think if she can just get four hours and maybe six hours of sleep at night, that will be a gigantic gift from God.

If you just keep somebody up, and you don't let them sleep, they go to Narnia, as I would call it. And you don't remember much that happens during the day or night. It got so bad that I got these terrible dizzy spells. I would be on camera with the room spinning. So I would sometimes half crawl from my couch to the bed, like some sort of gorilla. I would sometimes have to steady myself against the hallway walls. When I would go to work, the second I would get to work, I would crawl under my desk and sleep for 45 minutes until somebody woke me up and said, "We have a really great Kardashian family clip." I tape the show once a week. It's a 22-minute show. I get to be a crazy person and a goofball. I tell fart jokes and make fun of celebrities and reality shows. And it's so much fun. It's the

time of my life. I can't believe somebody is paying me to screw around on television.

And then the camera turns off, and I go back to this little baby who's got two holes in his heart. So no matter how much milk we pack into Eddie, he is not gaining as much weight as the doctors want. After about six weeks, the cardiologist says, "Let's just do it." And I'm actually relieved and scared of course, but relieved that we're finally doing it.

GUNATILLAKE: Relief, fear, and back again. A cocktail of emotions. Let's recognize that this is a full-on story to listen to. And let's also recognize what emotions are here for us at this point. Worry, fear, uncertainty. Naming the mood that is here now helps us see that emotions sweep in, and like weather patterns, pass through.

McHALE: Our cardiologist refers us to a pediatric heart surgeon named Dr. Vaughn Starnes. Dr. Starnes is a superstar, he is Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen combined. In our first meeting, I asked how the surgery is going to go. So he draws pictures of what he's going to do, says that he might be able to use some of the organic material of his own heart to patch the hole instead of Gore-Tex. He tells us that he's done this surgery thousands of times. And I can tell that he's had these exact same conversations with other parents who come in at level 10 stress, and he is at level one.

We schedule the surgery. I'm going to just tell you right off the bat, it's a success. Thank God. This is not a terrible story about some procedure gone wrong. It's a different story entirely.

The day of the surgery arrives, it happens to be St. Patrick's Day, but instead of looking for a holiday excuse to go drinking with my friends, I am racked with anxiousness and fear and hope. I'm almost drunk with adrenaline. We drive to the hospital and carry him into the anesthesiologist. And then for the first time, since our baby was born, we just hand him over to someone else.

It is not natural. It doesn't make any sense. And we realize, well, that's all we can do. It's a terrible feeling of helplessness. And we begin to wait, and we wait.

Every minute is a very long minute. And you just kind of wander the hospital. Go look at snacks you're never going to eat. During this, other kids are getting heart surgeries that day as well. We pass other families in the halls, nod as we walk into our different little waiting rooms. We chat with one mom and dad for a few

minutes. Their baby is getting some sort of valve transplant. It's more complicated than Eddie's surgery. And then we go back to waiting more. Ninety minutes later, a nurse steps into our tense waiting room. A beat of expectant silence, and then she says the surgery went great. Eddie is recovering in intensive care. My mom is standing next to me, and she bursts into tears. I feel like I could cry too, but I'm more numb still.

Sarah and I walk quickly with the nurse to go see our son and see what he looks like. We entered the ICU and Eddie, he's still knocked out, this tiny body nestled in an orbit of wires. He's very peaceful looking, unaware that his little body has been through something insane. I watch him breathe in and breathe out, and breathe in. For the first time in a long time, I relax.

GUNATILLAKE: Let's breathe with Eddie and Joel. Peace in, peace out. How we are, can affect those around us and how our breath is, can affect how we are. The breath breathing itself. Peace in, peace out.

MCHALE: Not everyone is so lucky. As we turn a corner, Sarah and I see the private waiting room with the other family we had spoken to earlier, the one whose child was getting a more complicated surgery. There may be 10 family members in this small room with no windows, and they are quiet. And Dr. Starnes and the nurse walk inside and close the door behind them. We know the news is not good.

Eddie is on the pediatric cardiology recovery floor for about five days. We meet a lot of other parents. We share our children's stories, conditions, and diagnoses. Now, before the surgery, our friends and family would say stuff like, "I'm so sorry this is happening to you. I'm so sorry."

Here on the pediatric cardiology recovery floor, other parents say, and I'm not joking, "Oh, we were hoping that our kid had your kid's problem." And they say it kindly and warmly. After months of feeling like we were unlucky or had a terrible challenge, I'm realizing that we were the lucky ones. It seems so weird because it does seem kind of like luck. One elevator goes up, and another one goes down. It's a high stakes lottery that every parent enters when they have a kid, whether they realize it or not. We didn't do anything to deserve Eddie's surgery to go well. And that other family did nothing to deserve their terrible loss.

So what is the profound wisdom that I take from this whole experience? The whole harrowing, terrifying heart surgery on my little baby that ended up going so

smoothly. Well, here goes, I don't know, I don't know. I thank God every day that I get to spend time with Eddie and Isaac, his little brother.

I think people always go, "Why me? Why is this happening to me?" And I have learned now, I think the phrase should be, "Why wouldn't it happen to you? It happens to everybody else." Nobody is special. And everyone is special. Life is happening to all of us. And when it happens to your kid, you just deal with it as best you can. And you love your kids, endlessly, and endlessly, and endlessly.

When we bring Eddie home, another part of our life begins. His troubles aren't over. During his first year, he wore a helmet because his head had flattened so much from lying in hospital beds and his own bed. Later, we learned he's severely dyslexic, he has ADHD. And he is on the autism spectrum. He's very advanced in some ways. He was walking at just before 10 months. And he's able to handle life in other ways that kids can't. His challenges feel like superpowers.

A dozen years later, late night TV show host Jimmy Kimmel and his lovely wife, Molly, have a baby. They are friends. And so we hear the news from their friends and family email list. Later, Jimmy sends a group email, it says, "I'm sorry to follow the good news with not so good news." He explains that his son, Billy, has a congenital heart disease. Then he writes, "A man I'm told is the best surgeon in the world for this procedure, Vaughn Starnes, will likely do the surgery."

I sit down and write an email to Jimmy and his wife, Molly, sending our support, a couple of jokes, and reassuring them that Vaughn Starnes is a complete and wonderful genius. Billy Kimmel's journey is harder than Eddie's was. His condition is more complex, there are multiple surgeries. But he is on the other side of that with two parents and his sister that love him intensely. So months later, Jimmy and his wife, Molly, host an annual camping trip to a glamping site near Santa Barbara.

Glamping is really just renting a room at a hotel that looks like a cabin. So it's about 50 of us. We sit around a very warm fire. We're eating and drinking, and the kids are riding bikes. My family arrives on Friday night, the big kickoff weekend. On the trip up, Sarah and I talked to Eddie about Billy. He knows that he's had surgery, very similar to his. So we get there, there's a huge lawn, and we're all standing around greeting each other. Jimmy is holding Billy in his arms, and we walk up and say, "Hi." It's the first time Eddie has ever met Billy. And as we walk up to the Kimmels, Eddie sees Billy and says, "Is that Billy?" Billy is not

even one year old yet, and Eddie is 13. Jimmy says, "Yes." And Eddie immediately follows up with, "Can I see his scar?"

And we're all surprised. It's not the sort of question that a grownup would ever ask. In fact, it's a sort of question that only a kid like Eddie would ask. So Jimmy unsnaps Billy's onesie and reveals his little chest. Eddie looks at his scar, reaches out his hands, and traces his finger down the scar. And we all look at each other, and then of course, we all burst out crying. So two things feel very clear now. Eddie has turned out just fine. And Billy is going to be fine too, more than fine.

Sometimes what it seems like is that life's randomness delivers you a perfectly random miracle. And Eddie is a miracle, and so is Billy.

GUNATILLAKE: Okay. Joel's story may have been a bit of a ride for you. And so for a short practice together, let's start slowly. Inviting any tension that might be here to soften. Letting the breath breathe itself. And if you can, giving most attention to the out-breath with its natural qualities of softness and release.

When Joel talked about doing nights with Eddie, I remember that so well myself with my oldest, watching TV, having him on my chest as he sleeps. It's like yesterday, his heart on mine, not two, not one.

As he lies there, I can feel his breathing, the movement of his chest up and down, a different rhythm to my own. The TV is muted, and I'm watching with subtitles. It's quiet, and I can feel his breath, the faintest of air streams on my skin. It's really quiet. And I notice his heartbeat and mine, and I tune in. So the breath quiet, what other rhythms are here? What subtle energies can you tune into in the body?

If you'd like to, and you're able to, do please put your hand on your heart, or your pulse at your wrist if you prefer. The heartbeat can be known just through our awareness, but it can be subtle. So you can give yourself a hand by using your hand. The magical sensitivity of your fingers, inviting the heartbeat or your pulse into the foreground of your awareness. This energy we all share, this life force, the smallest of us, and the greatest. If those labels even make sense.

Joel's wisdom, earned the hard way, is that great misfortunes are just part of life's randomness. No deeper meaning or message, just this chaotic dance. How are you with that? Is there agreement, acceptance, disagreement, protest? Sometimes it's natural to want there to be a reason for everything, but things are more complicated than the

linear universe it sometimes appears to be. So when chaos dances, we too can dance with it. Our hand to our hearts, feeling the life, and touching the scar.

Thank you, Joel. Thank you, Eddie. And thank you. Let's keep on dancing.