

## Meditative Story Transcript – Marla Spivak

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**ROHAN GUNATILLAKE:** If the world manages to keep spinning a while longer, a chunk of our gratitude will surely be due to Dr. Marla Spivak. Dr. Spivak is an acclaimed entomologist at the University of Minnesota, a MacArthur “genius”, and a leading light in the movement to save the planet’s spiraling honey bee population – which, in turn, just might help us humans survive as a species, too.

In today’s Meditative Story, Dr. Spivak shares the circuitous and at times terrifying path that led to where she is today. How are our lives pollinated at various points with the insight and experience we need? How do we take those and somehow construct a life that makes sense?

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.

**SPIVAK:** I’m lying on a small hard bed, watching the ceiling fan creak around, and around, and around. The small hotel room is hot and stuffy, closing in. I am very ill. I’m alone in a small town at the foot of the Andes in Peru. Outside my window the swift Urubamba River churns, filling the air with moisture. Just months ago I was traveling happily with a friend through Paraguay, and then Bolivia on the backs of trucks, low

subtropical forests giving way to thick jungle. Now I'm so weak that I can hardly make it to the shared bathroom down a dark hallway. How did I end up here?

I suppose the answer to that begins years earlier. I'm a freshman at Prescott College in Arizona, and I'm making my way across campus to the library. It's a winter afternoon, the smell of pinyon pine and junipers crisp and thick. I walk across the field of high chaparral desert to enter the standalone brown building. I'm 18, a little bored, a little lost. This is an experiential school in an experiential decade, but I have no idea what experiences I'm supposed to be having, and my first year is almost half over. My parents just want me to get an education then come home to Denver and marry a nice Jewish doctor. I peruse the biology section, and for some reason pick up a white covered book with some delicate bees sketched on the front. It's called *Bees Ways*, by George DeClyver Curtis. It looks like a quick read. The librarian pulls the stiff manila card from the book and stamps the due date in dark purple ink: December 10, 1973.

By the time I get back to my dorm, the late afternoon light is fading, and the air has cooled. A blazing Arizona sunset colors the west windows of our common room. I settle into an armchair. I open the 30-year-old book, and then ... I can't put it down. It starts with a honey bee queen laying thousands of eggs and ends with a queen in her final hours, still attended by her daughters. I had no idea insects could be social, that the hive is a superorganism and self-organized. I didn't go looking for bees, but bees came looking for me.

By spring, I am apprenticing – for credit – in one of the many large apiaries containing 30 to 40 beehives along the banks of the Rio Grande in New Mexico. One of my first days, I zip into the white suit, pull the netted bee veil over my face. I feel like an astronaut, walking on the moon. I pad out to the hives to do my task, which involves slowly prying open the lids on the wooden boxes to check on the bees in each hive. I can see through my veil to the purple Sandia mountains on the eastern horizon, and the river banks to the west, covered with flowering salt cedar. The bees love the tall scrubby plant. They are doing their happy bee thing, foraging for flowers, filling up their little honey stomachs with nectar, collecting pollen on their hind legs. flying back to their hives. The bees are everywhere, literally millions of bees flying to feed their colonies. The sound is incredible, a loud hum. I stand still and look up. The sky is thick with darting, dancing bees. I can't hear anything but bees. It's a calm, warm buzz, comforting and enveloping. They don't even notice me. I don't notice me either. I'm in another world, a non-human world. It's not just me standing there, it is the whole universe made apparent all at once, euphoric. I'm an atom in this whole thing, if that. This is what I'll do for the rest of my life.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Let's stand here with Marla too, ourselves mere atoms. Hear the buzz. Take in the intensity of scent and sight. 360-degree fragrance. Feel how everything is here, so much bigger than us.

**SPIVAK:** I hear the calm buzz again when I move to Arcata, California. I'm finishing my degree at Humboldt State. It's been a hard year. I endured a sexual assault. I survived, but I'm not myself. I'm going through the motions of schoolwork. I'm living with a beekeeping family in the redwood forests along the Mad River. I feel safe near the solid, ancient trees and around the hives sitting on rich, muddy soil. I gather the family's milk cows every evening and bring them in to be milked. And I help with the bees. Or I try to. I'm not a very good beekeeper. One day I open one of the colonies, and I get stung so many times I end up in the hospital. I have a lot to learn about them, like the miraculous alchemy of how they turn floral nectar to honey. By collecting pollen, they pollinate most of the fruits and vegetables we eat. I love how the bees inside and outside their hive are self-organized, that there's no one in charge, not even the queen. They're all acting independently but also in concert and collectively. I admire them, their instincts, their community.

That same year, a friend brings me to an Aikido class in downtown Arcata. The dojo is a softly lit room with nut-brown walls and light-colored canvas mats. At the front of the room sits an altar decorated with flowers and crossed wooden swords. I am completely struck by how calm the space feels. Some people are dressed in flowing black hakamas. I'm wearing sweatpants. We start with stretching and breathing, and then we practice some moves. We learn how to fall and roll. We hold each other's wrists, and slowly, I learn the choreography. The art is about giving and receiving, breathing in and out. And just something about that practice rearranges something inside me. I have been absent from myself, and suddenly I am back in my body.

I learn that Aikido is about the interrelationship of coordinated movement: it's this non-defensive martial art. It's interacting with another person to neutralize, or harmonize, never to escalate. To interact with, never to impose on. As I practice expressing and flowing with this energy, I suddenly realize: this is just like beekeeping.

Beekeeping requires focus, awareness, and calm, and making sure your movements are smooth. You must understand what the whole beehive is doing and its growth relative to the season, to the flowers. You're looking at this colony, and it's reflecting everything that's going on in your area, from floral blooms, to seasons and weather patterns, to everything. You learn to notice the different smells coming from the colony, because those indicate the bees' health and different moods. It's a lot of information, and you really have to be present to take it in. If your mind is somewhere else from your body or your mind is split in two, you get stung.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Let's not get stung. Ground your mind in your body wherever feels most natural right now. Mind-body connected. Body-mind connected.

**SPIVAK:** How you harmonize with that energy, how you work with it, and that dance and rhythm with the bees and the beekeepers, that's that whole thing.

And now I'm on this small hard bed in Peru, watching that ceiling fan creak around and around, the Urubamba River roaring dully below my window. My illness: intestinal parasites.

I'd come to South America after college, to an international bee research conference in Florianopolis, Brazil. Afterwards, my friend Abby and I travel northwest, through Paraguay's Gran Chaco desert, and then Bolivia's varied terrain, and then on to Peru, looking for bees and beekeepers. Eventually, after Abby returns home, I continue with another friend, and end up bushwhacking through jungle, with hopes to load into a canoe that will carry us north hundreds of miles to the Amazon. I love all the new languages and landscapes, but this jungle is too much for me. The river has rapids we can't navigate, and I return back upriver to the remote, high tropical city of Quillabamba, sicker than I've ever been. Now, the hotel proprietors are telling me I must leave and go to the cinderblock hospital down the street.

Somehow I stumble into the woman's ward. Patients I share the room with have local families who bring them food, but I know no one, and I don't trust the food or injections the nurses want to give me. I'm dehydrated, and I'm slowly starving. I realize I will probably die here. My parents have no idea where I am; I haven't called them in months. I put a blanket over my head. "This is it," I think, "Whatever." But then a doctor arrives. Dr. Plaza is from Bolivia, and his wife: German. He is tall, with thin, sharp features and gray hair. "You crazy American," he says. "What are you doing here?" He gives me the antibiotics I need. I tell him about the bee conference, the travel searching for beekeepers, the river trip.

A few days later, he returns and tells me he has a chacra, which is a farm, downriver a little ways. He keeps bees there, and the queens keep disappearing. "While you're recovering, which will take some time," he says, "will you take care of the bees on my chacra?" I say, "Hell yeah." Not for the first time, it dawns on me: bees and beekeepers are saving my life.

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and like nowhere I have ever been; The whole valley is basically a garden of trees. It smells like fruit and cooking fires. It's my idea of heaven: beehives, fruit trees, mountains, and a big river.

I'm coming to see that I'm happiest learning new languages and new ways of doing things, whether it's on a farm or peering inside a beehive. What are the bees telling us through their pitch and hum, their pheromones and rhythms and dances? How can I best align my energy to theirs? All the while, I keep observing.

By the time I become a professor in Minnesota, it's becoming clear around the world that bees are in big trouble.

One day I find myself in the breezy, grassy bee yard of a large-scale honey producer named Pete, along with a handful of other local beekeepers. The commercial beekeepers in Minnesota are not a talkative bunch. But we must work together. Colonies of bees around the world are dying from parasites, pesticides, and a treacherous loss of habitat. Bees have given me so much. Now I'm in a position to perhaps help them. The lessons of the dojo come back: neutralize, or harmonize, never impose. How can I help the bees be whole again?

I need these men to help me test the new queens I'm breeding in my lab. The bees have a genetic trait, hygienic behavior, which helps them fend off parasitic mites and diseases. But these guys aren't sure what to make of me or my queens. I want them to compare the honey production from their queens to the honey production from my queens. So here we are, dressed in our thick, wrinkled bee suits. We start lifting the honey boxes on top of the hives. One of the beekeepers is a tall man, quite strong. When I lift the first one, I say, "This one is *heavy!* What do you think?" And he lifts it like it's a shoe box. "Light!" he says. And I start laughing in admiration; our standards are completely different, but we are starting to connect with each other through our bee veils. The beekeepers can see that I am one of them, a beekeeper, and we all grin at each other.

The data we collect that day is useless, but the laughter and our shared caring for these insects – that's *not*. An image pops into my head, a possibility anyway: individual members of a vast universe, miraculously working together in concert, accomplishing something far larger than themselves. It's just what the bees have been showing me all along.

**GUNATILLAKE:** When I got married, it was on a so sunny May afternoon in a walled garden in the English countryside. As part of the ceremony, my mother-in-law did one of the readings. It was a poem about bees from the wonderful Carol Ann Duffy's 2011 collection simply called *The Bees*. And the poem was itself called *Virgil's Bees*.

The closing line of which is with me now: *in pear trees, plum trees; bees are the batteries of orchards, gardens, guard them.*

It's now, thankfully, well known how important bees are to everything. So let's do a meditation in honor of bees and of everything. You could call it an interdependence meditation.

Interdependence is arguably the most important idea in the mindfulness tradition. The idea that nothing, or more accurately, no-thing, exists independently of anything else. If this, then that.

So sit, lie, or walk comfortably. Inviting mind and body together. Not fragmented. Not two, not one.

Without bees, the planet likely won't be able to sustain all the humans that are alive today. Without them we could not be here in this moment. Interdependence. And in the middle of it, Marla, a speck in a broader cosmos.

We can see this interdependence everywhere in our lives. If we look at a child, it's easy to see their parents, their grandparents in them. The way they look, the way they act, the things they say. We are all a continuation. The people in our lives are within us. When we walk and talk, they walk and talk as well. Looking inside, we can be in touch with everyone who has gone before. We do not exist independently. We inter-are.

Come back to your body if you've been absent from yourself at all. Use whatever you need to reconnect: breath, posture, touch.

Everything relies on everything else in the universe in order to manifest – whether a star, a cloud, a flower, a tree, a bee, a you, a me.

It is another world, a non-human world. The whole universe is here in everything, apparent all at once. Us, just atoms. Central but not.

Can you tune into this interdependence? The air we're breathing in, that energizes us, has passed through countless other beings. Our bodies: stardust.

Learning to see interdependence can be a life's work. And there can be a euphoria that comes with it, and also a fear.

That's ok. Being everything and nothing is a lot.

I remember the moment when I realized that I wasn't the most important thing in the universe. It was scary, but more than that, it was the greatest relief. It didn't all have to be about me. There is a bigger game. Chains and networks and swarms and hives. There's no one in charge, not even the queen.

There is a hugely important Vietnamese Zen teacher called Thich Nhat Hanh whose main teaching is about interdependence. But he doesn't call it that. He called it interbeing. Because we inter-are. Inter-bee-ing.

In his words: *Through my love for you, I want to express my love for the whole cosmos, the whole of humanity, and all beings. By living with you, I want to learn to love everyone and all species. If I succeed in loving you, I will be able to love everyone and all species on Earth ... This is the real message of love.*

How you harmonize with that energy, how you work with it, and that dance and rhythm with the bees and the beekeepers, that's that whole thing.

Thank you Marla.

Thank you bees.

Thank you Thay.

And thank you. Bee well.