

Meditative Story Transcript – Milana Vayntrub

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MILANA VAYNTRUB: The next year is my Bat Mitzvah. I've been working on my speech for my candle lighting ceremony in which I thank my folks, friends, and loved ones. I am so excited to perform for everyone. Especially my dad, who's flying halfway around the world to see it.

Three days before the big day, I head to the Tom Bradley Terminal to pick him up. It's me, my mom, my little sister who is six months old.

I stand watch at that same railing; this time I'm tall to peek over it. But as the last person rounds the corner to walk up that ramp, my dad still hasn't shown up. My mom walks over and talks to the airline lady, who tells her that he never got on the plane. There's nowhere to call. There's no way to get a hold of him.

So my mom calls my grandmother, who rushes over. She's a tough broad whose resourcefulness was able to bring my whole family over from Uzbekistan. Her one downfall, she burps when she gets nervous. Usually it's a welcome bit of comedic relief, but now it just adds to the cacophony of panic in the airport. Everyone is freaking out, and I'm scared too. Where's my dad?

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: I'm guessing Milana Vayntrub first came onto your radar through her AT&T commercials. It was in 2013 that the Soviet-born actress and comedian first began playing saleswoman Lily Adams in a host of memorable spots. From there, her star exploded: the voice of Squirrel Girl in the Marvel Rising franchise, a writer for Adult Swim's "Robot Chicken," the short documentary "Can't Do Nothing," which raised funds and resources for refugees in Jordan and Greece. You can now catch her in the film "Werewolves Within."

Milana grew up the daughter of Jewish refugees, and in this episode of Meditative Story, she describes the unusual relationship she had with her father – which is, in turns, tender, funny, and ultimately a little mystifying. Maybe you have someone like that in your 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.

VAYNTRUB: The weirdest thing just happened at lunchtime. Kevin and I have been friends since pre-K, so that's like eight years now. We're sitting at the end of the lunch table, eating our sandwiches, and he tells me his dad owns a restaurant. I assume the

restaurant is in Russia because my dad also owns a business, and his business is in Russia.

But then Kevin invites me to come visit his dad's restaurant. I say, "Kevin, c'mon, how are we going to get there?" And he says, "It's on Sunset Boulevard, my mom can drive us, no problem." And I think, "Wait, your dad lives here? In Los Angeles? I thought all Russian dads lived in Russia? This blows my mind.

Honestly, I assumed being away all the time was, like, a cultural thing. But now I'm finding out living far away is just a my-dad thing.

Going to the Tom Bradley International Terminal in LA is like going to grandma's house. I'm 10, and I know the route by heart. I know where we should park the car. I know where to stand so I can be the first one to see him before he rounds the corner.

The terminal is all cold stone and metal, but it's one of my favorite places in the entire world. There's a giant screen that's always changing, flipping numbers and letters, showing us all the landings and arrivals, and the cities people are coming from. A long silver railing separates me and a giant group of people, from those we're here to greet. I love watching people reunite – the tears and hugs – but I can't get distracted. I have to catch my dad's eyes before he catches me not looking. I'm little enough to squeeze between people, and I hang under the railing, waiting for him.

I scan for a long time, and then suddenly there he is. He turns the corner, looks up and yells "Masyu!" – his nickname for me. I take off toward him, the loose sole of my Keds sneakers catching and almost tripping me before I catch myself. He's pushing his luggage cart up the long inclined path as fast as he can – no doubt they intentionally designed the international terminal this way as a clear metaphor and a message to the immigrants entering: your journey is uphill.

I run past the designated "Do not cross" line into my dad's arms, crashing my face into his neck, and getting a big comforting whiff of his old leather jacket.

My dad's back. Again.

In elementary school, my dad is with us one month and then gone one month. As the years go on, it starts to be here one month, gone two months. Then here one month, gone three months. Then here two weeks, gone six months.

Most of the time, I don't even miss him. It's just normal.

But he misses a lot of stuff in my life. He doesn't get to see me be Santa Claus in the school holiday show. All of the daily drama with my friends, and later on, my boyfriends. The classes that are hard for me. The art projects I crush! Most of puberty.

He's working over there to give us a better life here. He's doing his best. I know that. I know he loves me.

As I get older, we begin to fight more. As soon as he arrives, I ask when he has to leave. Bracing myself. I say, "Why do you have to? We have all we need here. Except you. We just need you."

"Oh, wouldn't that be nice to stay," he says. "You don't think I want to stay?" he says. "I have a few things I need to take care of," he says. "I don't want to bore you," or "You wouldn't understand"

And then he's gone again.

GUNATILLAKE: Are you here or have you gone too? If your attention has drifted away to something else that's okay, just use this as an invitation to bring it back.

VAYNTRUB: Now I'm the one on the airplane with my cousin. I'm 12, and it's my first trip back to Uzbekistan since we came to America when I was just two years old.

When we land, my dad is standing there waiting, smiling with his whole face. He scoops me up with a hug like I'm still a 6-year-old, but it makes me so happy that I let him.

From there he takes me and my cousin out to eat with a bunch of his friends. The food just keeps coming. Plates of plov, which is this rice dish with carrots and lamb that's almost sweet. He orders lepyoshka, a bread thing that's flat in the center, so it's thin and crunchy, but really fluffy around the sides. He takes the hot lepyoshka with his hands and rips it into pieces so it cools down for everybody.

When the bill comes, it's \$8. My dad pays, and I think, "This place is awesome!"

He drives his Jeep Cherokee to his office, and the cool marble floors are a huge relief after the hot sun outside. He introduces me to all of his employees and shows me his big desk in his own big office. One woman's whole job is to make snacks for all the other workers... and me.

My dad makes sense here. He's in the center of everything, and he just seems so in his element. Seeing him here helps me understand him better. But I also get a clearer sense of what I'm missing.

The next year is my Bat Mitzvah. I've been working on my speech for my candle-lighting ceremony in which I thank my folks, friends, and loved ones. I'm so excited to perform for everyone. Especially my dad, who's flying halfway around the world to see it.

Three days before the big day, I head back to the Tom Bradley Terminal to pick him up. It's me, my mom, and my new little sister, who is six months old.

I stand watch at that same railing; this time I'm tall enough now to peek over it. But as the last person rounds the corner to walk up that ramp, my dad still hasn't shown up. My mom walks over and talks to the airline lady, who tells her that he never got on the plane. There's nowhere to call. There's no way to get a hold of him.

So my mom calls my grandmother, who rushes over. She's a tough broad whose resourcefulness was able to get my whole family out of Uzbekistan. Her one downfall: She burps when she gets nervous. Usually it's a welcome bit of comedic relief, but now it just adds to the cacophony of panic in the airport. Everyone is freaking out, and I'm scared too. Where's my dad?

After several hours at the airport we return home to wait by the phone. Days later we learn he was arrested as soon as he got off his connecting flight in Paris. We don't speak any French, but my mom eventually puts together that his ticket was counterfeit. He probably bought it from a travel agent who scammed him.

We cancel the ceremony part of my Bat Mitzvah, and it turns into a little party with my friends. My dad gets out three months later and flies home to tell us how good the cheese was in French jail, but he never wants to go to France ever again.

I am in my mid-20s before I realize that it is unusual to have one's father call every single day. But he's done it my whole life. The calls are short.

He'll say something like, "I called you yesterday and you didn't pick up." And I'm like, "I'm sorry. I was working." And he says, "Fine. Okay. Call me tomorrow." And that's about it.

My dad loves kids, so when we FaceTime, I often see him surrounded by his friends' children. "These kids, they're crazy," he says. "They love my mustache!" They yank at him away to go play with them. And he introduces us over video, and I'm a little jealous.

Nowadays, I only see my dad in person every two or three years. He'll come occasionally for a wedding or funeral. Between his visits, two of my friends lose their dads, and it hits me how much regret I'll feel if mine passes before I really get some quality time with him... and possibly convince him to be a bigger part of my life.

So I call him this time. We talk for more than a minute or two. And we make a plan to meet up in Santorini, Greece, a place I've always wanted to visit and just a short plane ride for him.

The trip is everything I want it to be. We both love water and seafood and being on a catamaran. We both stop what we're doing to watch the sunset. We both love Greek people.

The island seems like it's designed for partying, but that's not what we're here for. I'm really happy to sit on the beach with a book, and my dad is really happy to fall asleep next to me while I do that.

On one of our last nights, we find a new restaurant at the end of a stone street, where we can sit in a big open-air courtyard under bistro lights.

We do what Russians do best, which is just yell at each other. We yell when we're laughing, we yell when we're talking, and we yell when we're fighting. We eat, and we talk, and we laugh, and we yell. I feel so grateful for the trip for finally getting to spend real time together.

It all feels so sweet. Which quickly turns to bittersweet. I don't want to have to wait some unknown number of years to see my dad again.

So I bring up the conversation we've had many times before about him moving to the States. And he starts up again on how it's out of his hands, he has no choice. "I have to go back. It's terrible. I miss you guys, but I have to go back."

It's an illusion that this is out of his control. Our Russian yelling turns from happy to angry. "No one is making you go back, Dad. We don't need your money at this point. You're not making money for us. We're grown."

What we need is him, our dad. We need hugs, and someone to go with us to get our car fixed. We need more of him in our lives.

My dad and I both shout and cry, right there at the table. He pays the check, and I walk home on my own.

Two days later, he flies home to Moscow, and I eventually go back to Los Angeles. He continues to call every day. But I don't see him again for years.

GUNATILLAKE: Milana is here, present but without her father, We can be here for her though, steady, and solid, embodied. In this situation, have you taken sides? What does that feel like?

VAYNTRUB: I'm 16 weeks pregnant. And I ask my cousin to find out the gender of the baby from our doctor, but don't tell me. Instead, I ask her to tell my neighbor who will bake us a tiny gender reveal cake. My husband and I lay out a blanket. We're at the park with our dog, a phone propped up on a tree to capture this moment, about to cut into a cake to see if it's pink or blue inside.

“Breathe, Milana,” my husband says. I must have been holding my breath. Together we hold the cake knife and push down. One cut. Two cuts. Is that frosting blue?

My husband laughs in disbelief: “It’s a boy?!”

I imagine my son, then immediately my father. “My dad is going to be so happy!” He had two girls but always wanted a boy.

I FaceTime my dad from the picnic blanket. I tell him I’m having a son, and he has a cigar at the ready. He whoops and laughs and lights it on screen. His joy is infectious, even across the 7,000 miles that separate us.

The daily calls change. “How’s the boy? Show me the boy. I’m going to FaceTime you right now. Show me the boy.”

My dad books a trip to California to meet him.

After 12 hours on the plane from Russia, he wants to come over directly. Instead, I tell him we’re sticking with the plan I made him agree to beforehand. He takes a Covid test, quarantines, and then tests again.

He’s not happy about it, but I don’t back down. I tell him, “Sorry, nothing really matters to me more than his health. You’ve been gone this long, you can wait 5 days.”

When my dad gets to my house, the baby is sleeping on this little swing in our living room. My dad wants to wake him. I say, “We have to let him sleep a little longer.”

My dad sits on the floor next to the swing for 20, 30 minutes maybe, just staring at him until he wakes up. Then, my dad picks him up and kisses him all over. Kisses his face, his belly, his neck. He asks, “I want to kiss his butt. Is that weird? Can I kiss his butt?” I say, “Yea, you can kiss his butt.” He’s over the moon smitten by this kid.

But I also know that these days are numbered. In a few weeks, he’ll head back to the airport, fly back to Moscow, and then he’ll just be a cheerful, balding, mustachioed man talking to my son through a screen.

You can’t change people. You know this, but you try anyway, and you try, and you try, and you try, but you can’t. Then one day you see that you can change yourself.

My first day back at work is a press day for an upcoming movie. I do six hours of back to back Zoom calls with reporters from my bedroom, while my mom and husband take care of my baby in the next room. It’s agony, being even that far away from him.

I want something different for us, different from what I had. I want the closeness that comes from staying close. I want the intimacy that comes from sticking around after the charm has worn off, after you run out of stories, after you get sick of each other. I want to know my child in ways my dad never knew me.

For my whole life, it's like I've been in a long-distance relationship with him. But it's hard to find out who the other person really is in a long-distance relationship because one of you is always on vacation. For a long-distance relationship, it's pretty good. I know he loves me. He calls. He visits. But I want something different for my kid.

My dad always always said he had no choice, that he had to go. Maybe I'll understand that one day, or maybe it'll only seem crazier. But feeding my baby, late at night, his little body curled into my chest, I know he will never have to wonder where I am, or for that matter who.

GUNATILLAKE: Thanks to Milana's story, I'm reflecting on two things: what it means to be present for someone else. And what it's like to go away and come back, again and again.

So that's the thread we'll explore in our short meditation together, and we'll do a very classic meditation with a little twist of my own.

We'll start by closing the eyes, but only if that's safe to do and you feel comfortable. This technique works best when you're able to be in a quiet place. And having the body in a way that encourages alertness. So if you're sitting, letting the back be straight.

If possible, the body also held in a way that encourages openness. Letting the belly and face and hands be soft.

Alert and open. Balanced.

And now that we're a little bit settled, we're going to rest our attention on the sensations of breathing.

The easiest way to do this is to put a hand on our belly so please go ahead and do that if that's okay. Becoming aware of the sensations of breathing in the place where our hand meets the belly, rising and falling.

And what we're going to do is decide to make breathing the most important thing in the world right now. Putting as much of our attention here as we can, and resting it here.

Connecting with the sensations of breathing here in the belly. Enjoying the gentle rhythm and letting the mind sink down and rest here.

But of course, our mind will fly away. Our mind and attention is so used to moving from one thing to another. So it is little surprise that it would also do that now while we are meditating, so it's nothing to worry about, you're not doing it wrong.

So given that we are easily distracted away, what we are going to do here is train ourselves to be more steady.

And we do it like this. Despite our best intention to stay connected to our breathing, we will notice our mind slipping away. And each time we notice that our minds have slipped away from the breath, we just bring it back to the breath in the belly. And we mark that by saying the word "Back" softly to ourselves.

So let's give it a go. With hand-on-belly, we connect with the sensations of breathing here. Then when we find that we've become distracted by something we just bring our mind back to the breath and say the word "Back" to ourselves.

Back.

Back.

Back.

Back.

Back.

By saying the word "Back" each time we notice we've gone away and come back to the breath, we're training our mind. Training our ability to both notice distraction and to rest the mind in one place, abilities that are so useful at work and in life in general.

So let's give it another go. Remember, first with hand on belly we settle all our attention onto the sensations of breathing we find there. Then, each time we notice that we've become distracted and taken away, we bring the mind back and say the word "Back" to ourselves.

Back.

Back.

Back.

Back.

Back.

Ok. So this is Milana. Present, and grounded, and here. Knowing when the awareness is away. And inviting it back again and again.

This is one kind of training. The patience of bringing the awareness back again and again.

There is another kind of training though. And it's understanding why the awareness has slipped away.

So next time you're trying to do something focussed, be that in work or in a relationship, get interested in that. Yes, notice that the mind has wandered away. But if you can catch why it wandered away, what the trigger was, then there is real transformative wisdom to be had.

Thank you Milana. And thank you.