

Meditative Story Transcript – Morgan Saylor

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MORGAN SAYLOR: What if two people in a relationship are not really so much like a venn diagram with overlapping experiences and interests found at the intersection of two circles? What if they are more like two infinities stacked on top of each other? Each lifting the other up, as they tangle together.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: You might best know Morgan Saylor from her role as the teenage Dana Brody on the show Homeland. As an actor, onstage and onscreen, she often plays characters who face complex problems, who swing through wide emotional arcs toward unknown solutions. Before acting, her first love was mathematics — another kind of problem set altogether.

In today's Meditative Story, Morgan unfolds the ways in which math has given her a scaffolding, a way to approach the unknown with trust and openness, knowing that the world is full of infinite possibilities.

In this series, we combine immersive first-person stories, breathtaking music, and mindfulness prompts so that we may see our lives reflected back to us in other people's stories. And that can lead to improvements in our own inner lives.

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.

SAYLOR: I can tell I'm excited because my hands start to tingle. I've just gotten a new sudoku book — or rather, some photocopies from someone else's book — and I know I'm about to take my pencil and hover over a perfect grid of 9-by-9 squares.

My fingers have a giddiness to them. Like I'm floating in space a little bit, like I'm completely alighted by the warmest glow of the sun. Like I fit in the universe where I should. The math speaks to me.

Our house is a small brick fixer-upper outside of Atlanta. I'm sprawled on my green blanket on my top bunk. The room is dim in the evenings after school, but my dad has installed a little light just for me up here. I can make out the topography of my room: a non-working fireplace, my Weezer posters, a collection of about 60 little pig tchotchkes carefully lined up on top of my bookshelf.

With that pencil in my tingling 10-year-old hands, the world narrows down to this one magical sliver of space and time. I sit for hours just puzzling through. I love the challenge that puzzles present. There's no fear in math for me; there's only the right answer. That's

undeniably safe. You can get to it no matter what. Even if you take a detour, you can ask for help. Tomorrow I'll show the Chen twins at school how many pages I finished, and we'll compare our results.

It's just about unlocking the right order. There's a feeling of stepping into the dark and holding out those excited hands and searching up and down between ones and nines. It's the same excitement I get when I'm learning a new concept in math like how to find the volume of a moving shape. When I learn that for the first time, it feels like I'm peering into a secret keyhole of the universe.

My ability to solve problems is something I carry from one part of my life to the next.

Staring at the wall in my climbing gym, I love that the routes, the actual order of the moves, are called problems. When I'm harnessed in, I must plot out my 3-dimensional ascent: beginning with my hands on the start hold, then onward — a bent knee that will vault me to a safe hand-hold two sequences ahead. Instead of finding the volume of a moving shape, as in calculus, I am the moving shape. Climbing is like mathematics, but embodied: the same blind trust, the same stepping into the dark, believing the move I'm making is going to lead me onward to the next.

Eventually, I join a competitive team. I train six days a week at one of the first indoor climbing gyms in Atlanta. The place smells like sweat and chalk, and my ears are filled with the muffled commands of my strict Romanian coach. I make it to nationals, loving the adrenaline of competition. I focus in, hanging on to one improbable nub of plastic and then another, planning ahead to find the most power and speed.

But I am shocked to find out that I need to take a break from competing, I need to have another surgery on my leg. At a young age I learned that a bone cyst had been growing in my right tibia, just below the knee. By the time I am 12 and an avid climber, I've had three surgeries and now need a fourth. Each comes as a surprise, each requiring a full-leg cast. The surgeries weaken me; the variables in the problem have changed. I am discouraged after each operation.

The doctor tells me I have to take several months to heal. I think about quitting. But I don't like a problem I can't solve. I want to keep trying to solve it. And I hate not moving. So I climb anyway, with the stiff, bright green cast still binding my leg. The leg won't bend at all, and the cast is heavy to haul up the wall. I have only three limbs able to pull me upward. But after a few stilted moves, I'm able to feel the magic of the tingling hands and the feeling of the unknown becoming knowable.

Even after the cast comes off, my leg is weak. But the more I climb, the stronger it grows. So, I climb every day. I can feel the cause and effect. I see how changing the input side of an equation also changes the output.

In linear algebra, a vector is an object that has both magnitude and direction. I'm headstrong and scrappy. I'm beginning to develop a sense of my own velocity. Knowing this, I can trust my body on the wall. I begin to trust the direction of my mind.

GUNATILLAKE: Let's explore the velocity of your mind. My magnitude is quiet; my direction is towards calm. How about you? What is your mind's magnitude? What is its direction?

SAYLOR: Mathematics is my first love, but it's acting I choose to devote my life to. Stories enrapture me, and I find a thrill in making something on paper come alive. And both these disciplines braid themselves together to influence my perspective. My professional acting career begins in middle school with plays. This leads to film and television.

As I mature as an actor I begin to understand more about people, about our emotional ranges and our velocities. I'm cast in a film, "White Girl," as Leah, a young woman in a new city who falls for the wrong guy, a drug dealer who lands in jail. She makes it her mission to get him out. The role is difficult, not only because the character must inhabit a full range of emotion, including obsessive love, mental breakdown and drug-induced psychosis, but because the 100 scenes I'm in are shot out of sequence. This is typical on film sets but especially difficult given Leah's wild arc. To keep track of my character's headspace in each scene, I create a color-coded graph on the wall. I chart her highs and lows and her path through the scenes. She is like a sine wave, a smooth curve that oscillates up and down with different emotional amplitudes and frequencies. In some scenes, her acceleration changes because of cocaine or plot points. It's not so different from an algebra problem: what gap can you fill in to make it work?

But it's only once I get to the University of Chicago and take math classes that I start thinking in a serious way about infinity. It's strange I've never thought much about it before because soon it begins to color the way I see everything from acting to writing to the very nature of love itself.

One evening at a Hollywood theater I join a friend for the premiere of a new film. It's a movie about love. Waiting for it to begin, we scroll our phones and talk. We're sitting in the theater on plush fold-up seats. I wear a loose blouse — polka-dotted and blue, and high-waisted jeans. My friend is more dressed up than I am. Suddenly she remembers something she's been waiting to ask me about. A friend sent her a poem, and she is trying to make sense of its meaning.

The poem is about infinity being in small places.

"What does that mean?" she asks me, looking up from her phone.

I think about how when two planes or two beings intersect, we don't know what comes next. It's impossible. Each relationship is going to grow and change in ways that we can never predict. Each choice, each moment contains infinite possibilities.

I glance around the theater, its slopes and steps and lights and exit doors. I ask her to think of grains of sand filling up the rows and aisles of the theater. They slide around and make room for more grains. I tell her about how this ocean of sand is like love. There is a universe of sand here. And, a universe inside every grain of sand.

We're talking about endless endlessness, which is simply what infinity is.

And I suddenly understand infinity is a way to make sense of the logic of love, even past loves.

If we're dealing with people, and feelings, and emotions, those things aren't finite at all. They feel like the opposite of finite.

As I am saying this now I can't help but think about my partner. I think about how enormous the love I have for him is, how I never could have predicted I would ever have feelings this big about anyone. And I think about the small things about him that I love: like the way his voice sounds late at night when he is reading Chekhov to me, and the first time I saw a freckle on his neck when we had our first meal. I remember the first time I heard him speak when I was in the audience, watching him act on a stage.

And then I think about how much I love those things now, years later. These are each like one grain of sand, but they also contain a universe of feeling and possibility and trajectories that can go in any direction, including toward forever. My love for him and those things can grow in a way that I can never comprehend.

What if two people in a relationship are not really so much like a venn diagram with overlapping experiences and interests found at the intersection of two circles? What if they are more like two infinities stacked on top of each other? Each lifting the other up, as they tangle together.

I've never thought about it like this before.

A feeling so immense as love is something that we all hope will stretch and expand us in big and beautiful ways. And those people who are gone are still a part of us somehow, somewhere inside. Knowing love is infinite both gives us a sense of the power of love and at the same time can help us let go of the need to grasp it.

Each relationship, each choice, each moment contains infinite possibilities.

I snap out of my reverie and look over at my friend. I think I've probably lost her, but she is staring back at me, grinning.

GUNATILLAKE: In this moment let's pause and embrace the infinite possibilities that exist all around us.

SAYLOR: When I walk into the Manhattan Theater Club on west 55th street, the first thing I notice is the cold. Outside is that muggy east-coast summer, but I bring sweatshirts for rehearsals. I've just moved to New York, and I've taken the train from my apartment in Bed-Stuy. It's like a dream. I'm working with an incredible cast, including Cherry Jones and Zoe Kazan. Every day to warm up our voices, Zoe and I shout across the stage to each other. We pronounce our consonants, projecting our voices out every which way.

The rehearsals for "When We Were Young and Unafraid" are magical because we are creating our characters, giving them their shapes so they can become their own reality. The story takes place in the early 1970s. I'm playing Penny, the teenaged daughter of a woman running a, kind of, underground women's shelter for abuse victims.

Before the first scene, I move softly onto the dark stage, finding the glow-in-the-dark tape signifying my mark. As the lights slowly fade up, the audience finds bookish Penny alone at her kitchen table, wearing her pajamas and reading. Her mother, played by Cherry, comes down the stairs to make muffins. But then Zoe's character suddenly enters the stage with a black eye. She has just left her husband and needs help.

Throughout the first act, Zoe's character gives Penny advice on how to woo the high school quarterback. It's the way that information is passed on to my character, and the way my character receives it and makes sense of it, that changes her trajectory. This character just totally breaks open the horizon for her, makes her want to go in a different direction at a different velocity.

An actor's job is filling in the motivation for how the character gets from point A to point B. You're really just trying to color and add to that infinite space that must exist within the story of why. Functions in mathematics have a set of inputs mapped to an output. That's how we evaluate them, and so Penny, the character, is without any inputs at first. She's a math problem existing in a matrix that is waiting to be transformed. What is her direction now?

Throughout the rehearsals I'm trying to figure out how to inhabit this change in velocities. And I'm in that dark cold theater every day, and as my voice warms up, my hands start to get excited. I run through the right gestures and emotions in my head, the whole up and down of it. I see Penny's arc before me. It's exactly like the exploration of cracking a sudoku puzzle. Only instead of sitting on my bunk bed in a little halo of light, I'm standing on a stage that feels like it exists at the very origin of an x and y axis, like it's the

vibrating center of something so much larger than me. Something as boundless as infinity.

It's the greatest feeling in the entire world.

It's the feeling of being off the ground a little bit, of not knowing the unknown but also trusting that I will find a way in. All the pencil scratching and erasing must take place in these rehearsals. I puzzle my way through, so it's all pretty spare and, hopefully, elegant by the time the curtain finally goes up.

I try to access the trust. I think I can do it right. It's in my control.

There is a smoothness and elegance sometimes found in solving a proof. When you're first introduced to a problem, it's very messy. You go through more steps than you need to further explain what the numbers are doing, why they're telling the story they are. But the story that you want to show an audience is after you've done all the work. You don't want all of the ratatap to be there in your performance.

So I winnow that mess down little by little. It's funny that this is a similar feeling as doing math as a young person, and also of climbing in the gym. I just feel like I'm in the right place at the right time, and I feel a little bit weightless. I'm fitting onto the exact shadow that I should.

It gives me trust in myself and my process. It gives me trust in that I, too, can react to inputs and outputs, and if I do the work, I can trust that it will come out to be the right thing in the end. That's when I'm able to let go a little bit more and live in that moment. That is the simple goal of good acting and of a life lived well. It is the simple goal of love: to trust that each moment is full of infinite choices and possibilities, even if it feels messy. So much of it comes down to trust and faith that you will end up somewhere that makes sense.

Fear exists in me, but I try not to let it override the sense of possibility. It's when I find that trust in my own relationships, in my own writing, that I become motivated to let go and take chances. In those moments, everything is infinitely possible.

I think about why my hands are tingling, why I can feel the pulse inside my skin and the electric space around every finger. I sense it's because they are both here and there at the same time. They are right here in the moment, and yet they are also sensing infinity as they embark on their work.

Just thinking these thoughts right now gives me that exciting feeling in my hands. I realize it is the feeling of love.

GUNATILLAKE: Thank you Morgan. The way you see your life through the lens of mathematics is really lovely. That is a beautiful way of seeing. In her Meditative Story, “Our tiny meaningful lives in the vast universe,” astronomer Michelle Thaller relays the ways in which her studies of things both vast and minute create a sense of cosmic awe and deep connection, and I encourage you to listen to it via the link in today’s show notes.

Infinity is one of those things isn’t it.

Something which sits on the line between the beauty of mathematics and the mysteries of poetry and spirituality.

So it lends itself well to being the thing around which our closing meditation together will orbit.

I called it a thing, but is it even a thing? I don’t know. So let’s make not knowing part of our meditation too. Why not?

To start our exploration of infinity, let’s invoke another word Morgan uses in her story: boundless.

We can spend most of our days, even our lives I suppose, bound up in spaces, in definitions, labels. “I’m like this.” “I’m this kind of person,” “like these kinds of tv shows,” “wear these kinds of shoes.” So it can take a bit of work to switch into not being bound by any of that, boundless, so let’s give it a go.

And a trick I like to use to switch into that is to warm up by using our sense of hearing. With face relaxed, jaw relaxed, smiling if that feels okay (it does for me), let’s get interested in what the furthest away sound is that you can hear.

Don’t worry too much about locating a specific sound, what we’re doing is opening up the awareness to a literally larger space.

There will of course be a physical limit of what we can hear, so all the intention here is to open up. To make the move towards boundlessness, however small it might seem.

However the body is. Breathing. Opening out our awareness with hearing. Letting sounds rise up and fall away within our awareness.

Sensing now the space around your body, not within your body but the sense that you are a living being in space.

Using your sense of the body to feel into the space around you.

Have a play with both these senses — hearing and the physical sense — and get a taste for which one feels most expansive.

And let's go with that feeling of expansiveness, however strong or soft that might feel, and push it out.

Feeling into infinity. A space so large that even the strongest emotion is diluted into nothing. Feeling into infinity.

As Morgan so beautifully describes, infinity is also in small places.

We can often frame the infinite as being that which is boundless, that goes on and on forever away out there. But another way to understand infinity is by moving to the smaller.

Imagine a line the length of your hand. Halve that line, and you have a smaller line. Halve that line, and the line is smaller again. From a mathematical perspective you can keep doing that an infinite amount of times, all within the span of your hand.

Infinities contained within that which is confined.

This breath. Infinities. This body. Infinities. This mind. Infinities. This world. Infinities.

As humans, we like to know things, to have certainty. To be right. And others, wrong. It's just a thing our culture, our species likes doing. You've probably noticed.

One of the infinite things about infinity I love is that it's innately mysterious. By its very nature it's outside of our comprehension. Not something we can know. Something we can not know.

So let's enjoy the mystery of that for our closing moments together.

One of my teachers once described meditation as falling in love with mystery, falling in love with not knowing. I sort of know what she meant, but I don't know for sure.

So let's just be here. A speck of stardust in a universe without center.

Infinity, an idea that can only be pointed to not directly known. And being ok with that. Ok with not knowing, not having to be certain.

Endless endlessness. What even is that? I don't know. Let's breathe here, sensing, hearing, and not knowing together for a little bit.

Thank you Morgan for reminding us about the greatest feeling in the world. And thank you for spending time with us.

At a time so full of uncertainty and visible pain, that you choose to do so means a lot to us. Go well.