

## Meditative Story Transcript – Silvia Vasquez-Lavado

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**SILVIA VASQUEZ-LAVADO:** The path to the summit is wide open, a stretch of snow that comes to a knife point and suddenly drops away to rows of mountains far below. The edge of the world. All my thoughts recede. Triumph gives way to humility. I walk in awe of the beauty around me. I'm walking with literally my mouth open, like my jaw completely open wide taking in all of the available air. The beauty is almost unbelievable. What a privilege to take this walk.

**ROHAN GUNATILLAKE:** Silvia Vasquez-Lavado is the first openly gay woman to climb the famous Seven Summits, a bucket list of the highest mountain on every continent. As she reveals in her memoir, *In the Shadow of the Mountain*, there's a fragile person hidden inside that superhero who charges up mountains.

In today's Meditative story, we're joining Silvia as she pursues that seventh summit, the peak that has eluded her climb after climb: Denali. As she readies herself for this trek, events reveal to her that she can't just charge forward. She discovers the importance of self-compassion over the desire for conquest when dealing with life's greatest obstacles.

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.

**VASQUEZ-LAVADO:** In the entrance hallway of my apartment sits a painting of the Green Goddess of Compassion. Painted by a friend from El Salvador, it's vibrant, festive, full of color: greens, yellows, oranges.

I used to think I knew what compassion means. I used to think I have so much of it. I always felt love for my friends and the sorrows of others. I give much of my time and energy to others in my work life, my love life, and my causes. On my way to climbing Mount Everest, I brought a group of women to basecamp who, like myself, were survivors of sexual trauma so that they could experience the strength of their own hearts and bodies, and re-write their stories from pain into power.

That was exactly one year ago. Now from the command center in my living room, I'm setting out to climb another peak: Alaska's Mount Denali, it's North America's tallest. It will be my final of the so-called Seven Summits, the highest peak on each of the seven continents. I am about to become the first openly gay woman to claim this honor. Denali

is the only mountain to have evaded me, to have said, "No, not this time." I've scaled Everest, Kilimanjaro, Elbrus ... but Denali has rejected me twice. I must return. I've promised someone I will.

I'm leaving in 10 days. My place is a mess. My sleeping bag splays out in front of the fireplace. All my brightly colored puffy jackets are laid out in a row. Then come the nesting metal pots, plastic boots, down booties, rope, my sturdy tent, and the inflatable sleeping pad. Stacks of high-performance clothing pile high on the sofa, gear on almost every surface.

While packing for a new peak, I'm still celebrating the previous one. Last night, to celebrate my one year anniversary of summiting Everest, I went out with friends for dirty martinis. I'm drinking, in preparation for not drinking. The mountains are my temple. I can't drink there. But my drinking haunts me. Today it's just a hangover. I stumble over my gear, late for work.

Should I drive or take my bike? It's too late to find parking, and it's a gorgeous day. I put my laptop in a knapsack and then for good measure I add in a couple of training weights — they are made of sand and weigh five pounds each. This close to departure, every bit of training counts. I grab my house keys and briefly consider: helmet or no helmet? I catch a glimpse of my dark curls in the mirror. Do I really want helmet hair? I leave the helmet on the dining table.

I live on Twin Peaks in San Francisco, a steep incline overlooking the city. Coming down is a bit like falling off a mountain. I don't pedal at all. I like the adrenaline. The pastel colored houses whizz by. I can still smell the fog, which has only recently lifted. The road opens to a vista of the San Francisco skyline. Beyond the city, the Bay sparkles. The distant hills of Berkeley and Oakland remind me of Miraflores, of Lima, where I was born.

My bicycle rattles as I fly down Market Street. I start to cross Castro Street, a broad avenue that cuts through San Francisco lined with palm trees. Bright, the sight of antique trolleys rumble past. Out of nowhere a truck cuts me off. I swerve hard and catch my front tire on the trolley tracks. I fly over my handle bars head first, propelled forward by my weighted pack.

My eyes blink to adjust as I awaken. Where am I? I feel plastic straps wrapped tightly around my nose and mouth. I'm in an ambulance. The oxygen mask wrapped over my face feels familiar. I wore this on Everest after arriving at Camp Three in a whiteout. I crawled exhausted into my tent, removed the oxygen mask over my face, hugged myself, and wept.

But the ambulance is still moving. And my head is bleeding. "Let me out," I tell the attendants.

At SF General, they transfer me from a gurney to an ER bed and then roll my bed from scanner to scanner. I'm nauseous, and I have a headache. I'm cold. The oxygen mask presses hard against my face. Under a huge, bright fluorescent light, a nurse shaves my head so the doctors can look at my skull. I'm annoyed. The doctors keep coming and going without telling me anything. I've been to emergency rooms many times. Why haven't they taken me to a better hospital? And why aren't they releasing me? What's the big deal? I've fallen, and my head is going to hurt for a little bit. I'll just take the day off. I need to go home and pack.

I've saved up my vacation days. I've paid, planned, and organized for months. When I first summited mountains, I was driven by ambition, fear, a desire to walk along the knife-edge of life. I want to connect to my younger self, the little girl who is awed by the mountains and the sunsets and the innocence of a wild place. But with Denali, I'm also driven by a promise. To Lori.

I keep trying to explain but nobody will listen.

"Hey," I say to a nurse. She looks impatient. I scowl back. "Hello? I've got to get out. I've got to climb a mountain. Tell me something."

She brings a doctor. He says he has good news and bad news. This should be the start of a joke, but it's not. He's stern, almost harsh: "You're not bleeding anymore." He cuts me off before I can interrupt him, "But we just found a small tumor at the base of your brain stem. You're not climbing anything."

What? I'm frozen. Esta quieto. Just like when I was a child being scolded. A brain tumor?

My mother has died of cancer, and now maybe I am dying. Denali is falling out of my reach. I'm going to break my promise to Lori. I want to fight.

I've experienced many things that made me feel helpless. I was abused by a family friend as a child, beaten by my father, rejected by my family for my sexuality. Then I lost Lori, my partner, to suicide, 11 years ago. I didn't choose those things, but I conquered my helpless feelings with strength. Now, I'm 42 years old, an executive in Silicon Valley.

Being soft is dangerous. Walking to Everest base camp, I had to push the other women who wanted to turn back. I wanted to summit.

I wanted to hurry so I'd have no regrets.

But now I see I am made out of tissue and bone and water and cells. My brain concussion is so severe, the doctors keep me in the ICU for 10 days. I have massive headaches. Friends visit. They cheer me up and make me laugh. San Francisco's grand

Lesbian Ball, the annual National Center for Lesbian Rights Gala is in a few days, and we imagine my fancy dress and my half-balding head. I am so grateful for these friends.

In the quiet hours, I lie in the mechanical bed with scratchy sheets and let the gratitude come. It washes over me, stronger than the fluorescent lights. I remember the magical vistas I have seen, the dawns breaking over soaring peaks, the thin air sparkling with ice crystals. This is a softer feeling than I have ever experienced before. Yes, I am vulnerable. I've had a hell of a life. So much love. So much loss. Maybe it's time to go. Remembering the awe, the gratitude, I am opening. It doesn't feel scary. It feels wonderful.

The tumor turns out to be benign. My body has weakened, but I want to summit Denali more than ever. Not just for Lori. It's the same feeling I had when I saw Everest for the first time. The same feeling when Lori passed, a need to give and to walk until there was nothing left of my heart to give.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Alongside Silvia's gratitude for her life is the urge to conquer her next peak. How human really. What calls you? Rest, adventure? Maybe a bit of both?

**VASQUEZ-LAVADO:** Mount Denali always has something to teach me. As it comes into view from our propeller plane's tiny windows, the sight is breathtaking. I'm taken by the majestic views of the surrounding peaks. Everything is white. Shiny bright white. We land on an airstrip built directly on the Kahiltna Glacier, the entryway to climb the West Buttress route.

The first time I attempted — and failed — to climb Denali, I realized my marriage was crumbling and that I needed to spend more time with my mother, who was dying. The second time, turned back again by weather and bad timing, I learned humility. What would the unpredictable, 20,310-foot tall mass of stone and ice teach me this time?

This is my third attempt. We get to the 14K Camp, known as the midpoint; nestled below the upper mountain and with expansive views of the entire Alaska Range. A storm is building. We spend our days building up snow walls to protect our tent from being flattened by the ferocious winds and snow storms.

It rages for eight entire days. There are other teams at the 14K Camp. As the weather continues to beat down on us, people start turning around. My tent neighbors, climbers who seem much stronger than me, turn back.

What if I can't do this? Building up my strength has taken almost a year. At sea level, impatient, I've been drinking again. Never on the mountain. But has this slowed me down?

"Mountain," I ask, "what am I doing wrong?"

A small window of better weather opens. We take our chance. Everyone below thinks we are going to get killed. Midway to high camp, at around 16,000 feet, we get caught in ferocious winds. Gear blows away.

When we finally arrive at the high camp below the summit, I'm depleted. Still, I press on. I've pinned a picture of Lori to a small Tibetan prayer flag along with a photograph of me as a young girl in Peru wearing my turquoise tracksuit. Silvita, as my mother called me. I've hidden this photo for years.

The path to the summit is wide open, a stretch of snow that comes to a knife point and suddenly drops away to rows of mountains far below. The edge of the world. All my thoughts recede. Triumph gives way to humility. I walk in awe of the beauty around me. I'm walking with literally my mouth open, like my jaw completely open wide, taking in all the available air. You can't do that on Everest because of the altitude. The beauty is almost unbelievable. What a privilege to take this walk.

No other summit is this beautiful. No other summit has taken so much. A brass pin marks the top like a giant thumbtack hammered into ice. I kneel in front of it, weeping. I feel the wind whip through my soul.

*Hi everybody, this is my seventh summit, and I officially have become the first openly gay woman to have reached this milestone. And I want to dedicate this incredible achievement to love, to equality and love around the world.*

When Lori jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge, I thought it was an end, but really it was a beginning. Against heaven and earth, I've managed to get here. My grief spills into the snow. I send my love to Lori, and to Silvita, the little girl within me who started this journey.

But Denali also takes. My strength. My body. Over the next two days, the descent becomes harder and harder.

When I return to the Kahiltna Glacier where the planes land, the ice is so beautiful I drop to my knees. I can't rise. On Everest, I experienced an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment. With Denali, I'm spent. I look back at the mountain and think "you can't conquer this." I need a bath. I need a hug. I need to go home.

**GUNATILLAKE:** What happens if we play with the idea that in our lives, there is nothing to conquer? Feel the freedom of that, however quiet. Become intimate with your energy in this moment.

**VASQUEZ-LAVADO:** Back in San Francisco, the feeling of needing to be held doesn't go away. But on my return from Denali I experience heartbreak, separating from my

girlfriend, and I am devastated. I'm lonely, I'm tired. In the hospital, after my brain injury, I had let myself feel vulnerable. On the mountain, I had let myself feel vulnerable. But now that vulnerability feels empty, without the walk ahead of me, without love to hold me. One evening, after therapy, I go for a drink with a friend. I find myself driving and then not even remembering how I arrive at another friend's house. I pass out. I'm physically sick for five days in a strange apartment. I'm ashamed.

I tell myself. "Okay, Silvia, it's either one more drink or your life."

The Stanford campus is manicured to perfection. Palm trees. Cut grass. Red-tiled roofs. Birds chirping. On the third floor of a building at the School of Medicine, I enter a sunlit classroom where the chairs are arranged in a semicircle. We're here for an eight-weeks-long seminar on compassion cultivation training. A neurosurgeon friend has recommended this class, a friend who showed me a quote that would change my life:

"When love meets suffering, the heart is trying to be compassionate."

"When love meets suffering, the heart is trying to be compassionate."

I know suffering, in myself and others. But until now I only met it with love and compassion for others, not for myself. I've been unable to extend this grace to myself. But now I recognize my life depends upon it. And so we practice. First we learn to send compassion to all beings, then to specific beings, and then to ourselves. We do it over and over.

At first, it's easier to hold young Silvita in my heart. It's through her, finally, I learn to reach my grown, heartbroken self.

Our last-week assignment is to write a compassionate letter to ourselves. I procrastinate. On the morning of our last class, I open my computer and let my heart speak.

"Dear Silvita ... " Tears start pouring down my face. I write about everything: my drinking, losing Lori, my recent breakup. For the first time I really understand the damage I have done to myself through my drinking and my numbing. With sobriety, I feel. I feel the pain but also the gratitude and the awe. I feel my heart opening the way it started to in my hospital room. After I read my letter aloud in class, I look up. Everyone in the room is crying. They see what I am experiencing, that something massive like a mountain has shifted.

The self-compassion lets me stay sober. How to explain it? Maybe this image comes from so many years of alpine climbing. I think of myself as a figure in a snow globe. Life knocks you and shakes that snow globe. It just throws you like that. I've learned that it's compassion that calms the uncertainty, calms the snow, takes away the craziness. When you can settle the brain down, it opens up. And this is the key to figuring out, "Okay,

where is the pain? What is triggering the pain? Where is this coming from? Let's connect it, let's send it love."

I continue to explore where my love can meet my suffering.

My father grows roses. Red, pink, exploding in the lush garden of my childhood home in Lima. The rose bushes are interspersed with my mother's favorite plants, birds of paradise. I marvel at how all the delicate, brilliant blossoms persevere through my mother's death and father's decline. The smell of roses overpowers me as I open the carved, mahogany front door. Inside my father lies in his room, unable to walk. His frailty alarms me. He's unhappy. Sober, I can see it. Feel it.

This man was never very happy except when tending his garden. He failed to protect me. But he is my father and a human being. He is worthy of compassion. I think of Silvita, the girl in the turquoise tracksuit. She darts between rooms. She is worthy of my compassion too. I honor her with my writing.

I sit beside my father and take his hand. I stay with him. Even though it hurts to see him in pain. I tell him about the book I am writing.

Much of it is about climbing Everest, the trek where my softness and compassion began. That was when I felt the magic of being one star in the universe.

The mountains, especially Everest and then Denali, show me that strong is not the opposite of soft. Strength alone is not enough. I have finally learned that surrendering will take you further than conquering. Our biggest mountains are inside of us. At home there are no sacred rules to follow, no ropes to hold on to. Nothing for me to conquer. In my childhood house, there is pain. My father's. Mine. I send it compassion. I send him love to help him on his journey, a journey all beings will someday take.

Lying in his ground floor former office, now converted into his bedroom, my father strokes my hand.

He tells me over and over that I am his daughter, and he loves me. "Silvita, mi hija, mi hija, cuanto te quiero." I stay with him. I'm aware that I can give compassion without losing myself and that I can suffer, without giving in to suffering.

I tighten my grip on my father's hand as he weakens. I feel the awe of this passage. I find myself forgiving the damage created by my family and created by myself. The compassion I've spent so much time directing outwards at others finds its way inwards to myself. I don't feel empty. I feel connected. I feel love.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Thank you Silvia. That was really special. In photographer Donald Miralle's Meditative Story, "Where the water takes me," Donald finds that pushing his body to the limits

forces his muscles to shut down and his motivation to dwindle. It is ultimately awe and an acceptance of forces beyond his control which helps him transcend long held fears and restore his confidence. I invite you to follow the link in our show notes to explore his episode.

One of the ways I think about what I do is that I'm a bit like a sommelier. Matching meditations to go with our stories each week, complementing them and drawing out their flavors even more. And listening to Silvia today, the meditation practice I want to share with you is called tonglen. It's part of the Tibetan tradition, and the word means something like taking and sending — and is a classic compassion practice. And like many Tibetan practices is one that will deepen and deepen over time.

We'll do a simplified form of it so that you can get the sense of it. It has a visualization element, which can take some getting used to, but give it a go, and let's see how we get on. Remember we're not aiming for a particular result, the process is what matters here.

And we start by being comfortable. Life is hard enough, we don't need our body to be overly tight or tense or in a pretzel shape to do some meditation. Notice the activity of the mind, full of the momentum of the day so far, and let it settle down by itself. Particles settling down the bottom of a glass of water, so that what is left is just clarity. The gravity of our wise intention doing this practice together, inviting calm and stability and spaciousness to emerge. Know the body as it is, and let it be as it is. If there is something we can do to feel more comfortable, then let's do that. But again, just letting the momentum settle itself down. And letting what is left emerge and be in the foreground. Clarity. Spaciousness. Awareness, open and bright. Get a taste of that however quiet. It's here. Turn to it.

Now tonglen uses the breath in how it works. The idea is that we breathe in that which is challenging or difficult. And breathe out relief, lightness, freshness. So let's try that, being gentle on ourselves.

Breathing in. Breathe in feelings of heaviness, of tiredness, of friction. Breathing out. Breathe out a sense of brightness, light, relief. If you have that sort of mind, I invite you to do this with visualization. Breathing in difficult or negative energy across the whole of your body into every cell. And then it is transformed, breathing out, radiating out beautiful energy through every cell of the body. Take your time. It can take some practice for a visualization to come into step with the rhythm of the breath.

Now bring to mind someone in your life you wish to help. Someone you can visualize clearly. Take your time. Again, be gentle on yourself. Connect with what they are feeling, and breathe it in. When breathing out, send out the strength, solidity, courage, relief that they need. Breathing in, taking. Breathing out, sending. Breathing in, breathing out. Taking. Sending.

Now in this final part just let the target of your meditation grow out. Expanding the range of your compassion practice however feels right for you. Breathing in, taking. Breathing out, sending. Breathing in, taking. Breathing out, sending.

This idea of taking in the difficulties of others can feel like too much, but this is the kind of practice that really matures and evolves over time, a lifetime of inner adventure. And the people I know who've made tonglen their main practice are among the best I know.

Silvia, thank you for sharing your story and for your work. The world is a better place for it.

And thank you. The world is a better place for what you do too. Go well.