

Meditative Story Transcript – Dallas Taylor

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DALLAS TAYLOR: It begins to set in that the trumpet is now more than a fun creative outlet. Being good opens up possibilities that I never imagined. Traveling cross-country. Going to college. Perhaps I can play trumpet for the Chicago Symphony, surrounded by a world-class orchestra playing a big Gustav Holst piece.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Dallas Taylor is fascinated by the power of sound to tell stories. He created and hosts the podcast Twenty Thousand Hertz, which is a huge favorite here on the Meditative Story team. His work inspires us. But before he was a brilliant sound designer and creative director at 20,000 hertz, Dallas had another life – as a world-class trumpet player. In his Meditative Story he recalls the pressure and anxiety that came from this role — as he begins to realize that feeling this way didn't mean he was broken, it meant he was human.

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.

TAYLOR: The sunlight spills into the elementary school band room. The space is bright. Clean. But it has the lived-in smell of warm breath and wet reeds. Music stands fan out in rows of semicircles, standing at attention. I find myself drawn to the shiny instruments.

I've been thinking about playing the French horn or perhaps the drums, but everything changes when my band director shoves a trumpet in my hand.

The glare bounces off of its brass coils. My fingers run over the valves. I raise the mouthpiece to my lips. Something just clicks into place. I take a big, deep breath, and everything's resonating. My whole body is vibrating and buzzing.

I blow — controlling the sound with the tiny muscles in my face. The notes are resonant. And loud. It's powerful.

When I make this sound, everything else in my world fades away.

I take my position towards the center of the band room. Percussion is behind me. The trombone sits next to me. When I play, the sound blares into the back of the clarinetist's head.

I'm in the fifth grade, and I'm not a good student. I have terrible grammar. But in band, I'm awake. I'm present.

Hearing any one instrument alone is so powerful. But as we play together I feel us reacting off one another. There's nothing like the sound of different instruments all locking in together in harmony. It resonates in your body, in your brain. When I'm in a group, playing, it's as if I tap into a fourth dimension of humanity.

Soon, band is all I want to do. I'm shy. I'm quiet. But now I hold a very loud instrument and there's no hiding when I play it. I get a lot of attention. I make a group of friends for the first time. Deep relationships, all tied to music. Even when we have nothing else in common. We hang out after school together. Life begins to feel a little more normal.

I sit alone in a practice room in junior high, running through my scales. It's a musty little space, as small as a closet. My fingers pump up and down across the valves guided by muscle memory. The A scale, the A flat scale, the B scale, over and over and over. I'm ready.

I walk in calmly to a classroom several doors down. A giant opaque white sheet is draped from the ceiling. It obscures the faces of the judges. I can't see them and they can't see me. These blind auditions let the judges be more objective. It doesn't matter who you are, it's how you perform.

I take a breath, and play flawlessly.

I'm in seventh grade but I beat out all the ninth-graders for my first-chair seat to lead the school band. After that, there's no looking back. As the years pass, I become the best trumpet player in my school. Then the best in the region.

There's no real reason why I get so good, so fast playing the trumpet. No one else in my family is a musician.

I go to elementary school in Hughes, Arkansas. To find me on a map, follow the Mississippi River to Memphis, then dip a little south. I'm out in the country, a poor kid in a poor area. No one really has much opportunity. Certainly not my family.

My home's...broken. My parents divorce when I'm four.. Both remarry and move to different sides of the state. Life at home is uncertain, so I keep myself detached.

I spend a lot of time in cars, always being transferred from one parent to another. It's a five-hour round trip to pass me off between Mom and Dad's new homes. I stare out the car window and watch the flatlands pass by, the fields, the tiny towns with a hole-in-the-wall gas station. It feels hopeless. I think I might never get out of this place.

More than anything, I feel like a burden.

GUNATILLAKE: Throughout our lives we're carried by others: our family, our friends, society, even the planet. Perhaps we're all a burden in our own way. But, we don't always have to be

heavy. Shoulders soft, breathing soft, bring lightness to a part of your life where you feel like a burden.

TAYLOR: Miss Jernigan and I drive along the highway in her little black sedan. She's our band director and a French horn player, fresh out of college. Her dark, curly hair bounces as she drives.

Her car smells nice and is so much cleaner than our car. She's driving me to a trumpet lesson at Arkansas State University. The journey is an hour and a half, each way. I can't afford to pay for these lessons but Miss Jernigan finds a way to take me.

The better I get at the trumpet, the more the teachers around me start taking an interest in my progress.

Driving back and forth, it begins to set in that the trumpet is now more than a fun creative outlet. Being good opens up possibilities that I never imagined. Traveling cross-country. Meeting people from different backgrounds. Going to college. Perhaps I can play trumpet for the Chicago Symphony, surrounded by a world-class orchestra playing a big Gustav Holst piece. The trumpet is my ticket out of the desolate, extreme poverty that surrounds me.

It's profound to me, this investment in my talent that Miss Jernigan and the teachers who come after her make. The hundreds of hours of free lessons. The school trumpet my teacher insists I keep because I'm too poor to purchase my own. They're counting on me to succeed.

In my junior year at college, I'm sitting on the biggest stage of my life. It's huge, and everything shines. The music stands, the polished floor. This is the university's brand-new, multimillion-dollar concert hall. There's nothing else like it in the entire college. And tonight is the very first concert in this space.

I'm surrounded by my bandmates. We wear black suits, stiff shoes. The grand room, the rigid clothes, it feels like we're in another century.

I earned a scholarship to come here. The University of Central Arkansas. Where band and orchestra are taken very seriously. Everyone I play with on stage wants to be a professional musician, or a band director, or get a doctorate. But even here, I still stand out.

As a freshman, I've beaten out all the other undergrad trumpet players, and all the masters students. I'm first chair. I'm shining. I'm joyous. And I'm certain, I'm only going to get better.

The house lights dim. The bright stage lights hit us. Everyone in the audience disappears into a big black void. The conductor raises his baton, holds it, raises it again as he breathes in. Then flicks it precisely downward. The room fills with sound.

Just 45 seconds til my solo. Ever since junior high school, solos have been my thing. I always lean in and just take it away, knowing I'm going to crush it.

But tonight, something isn't quite right. My breathing is too shallow, too fast. I'm sweating. My shoulders are sweating. This has never happened to me before. All the delicate little muscles of my face are trembling. I need these muscles to play.

Beside me is the second-chair trumpet player, Megan. She leans over and does the unthinkable. She asks, "Hey, do you need me to do this for you? Do you need me to take this solo?"

I shake her off. I tell her "No no no no, I've got this."

Do I?

The weight of everything crystalizes into this one moment. The brand-new concert hall. All the people I care about who rely on me. My band director. The trumpet section. Every teacher that came before them who devoted countless nights and weekends expecting me to succeed. The expectations of my entire band. In a few seconds, every other player is going to stop, and the burden of the entire piece is going to be on me. If I frack a note, if I rush it, I'll scar this piece. Stain it for everyone.

On my cue, I rush in. I'm way too fast. My conductor's eyes widen in surprise. Everyone else will need to hurry up. I'm just trying to get it over with, so I can catch my breath. Sweat now pours from my body.

I finish in half the time. I've botched the solo.

I try not to think about my bandmates, the people in the audience, my professors, everyone who is relying on me that I've let down.

Afterwards, we don't talk about it at all. Megan, the second chair, doesn't say a word. No one comes up to me afterwards to ask what happened. But everyone knows.

I don't have words for what just happened to me. But from this moment on, something feels broken.

Suddenly, I cannot perform, in any context. My confidence completely falls apart. The opportunities to play don't stop, not at first. I schedule recitals. I practice, practice, practice. And then the day of, I call out sick.

My teachers get frustrated with me. The anxiety gets so overwhelming, it's making me sick. It feels like pressure, building up inside and taking the wind out of me.

The trumpet is a wind instrument. I need my wind to play.

What's worse is, I'm not good at anything else. My entire identity is wrapped up in Dallas Taylor, star trumpet player. The thing I wanted to do with my life was either being a performer, possibly a conductor, possibly a composer. I'm watching it all slip away. And I'm ashamed.

It's my last semester of college. We get a visit from the principal trumpet player of the New York Philharmonic, Phil Smith. He's one of the most regarded trumpet players in all orchestral history. He's giving a master class in the auditorium at the University of Texas at Arlington.

These days, I can't even make it through tuning with the band. You know that moment at the start of rehearsal, when all the instruments play a single note to get in tune with one another? Even playing that one single note, I'm shaking.

When it's my turn to ask Phil Smith a question, there's only one thing on my mind. I want to know about Mussorgsky's piece "Pictures at an Exhibition." It starts with this giant trumpet part, one of the most famous of all time. All the notes, right in the middle of the horn. Not too low, not too high.

And it keeps going and going and going and going, until the entire orchestra joins in.

In my current state of failure, this feels impossible to me. Not the notes themselves, but the pressure that's on the soloist. When Phil plays it, it's in a symphony hall, in front of the most cultured group of people in the entire world. It's broadcast to radio and television. Everyone is listening.

So I ask Phil, "How do you do that? What's your mindset?"

And Phil says, "I fall to my knees and I pray to God every time. Because it's an impossible task. Every time, it feels like it's not within my power."

The room goes quiet. My brain does the same. I'm stunned. Phil's been doing this for 40 years and he still feels like he can't. The weight of this impossible task. Everyone is counting on him. How fallible he is. And he does it anyway. He finds his breath anyway.

Hearing Phil helps me understand that we all have an inner struggle, deep inside of us no matter what the performance is. But whether this struggle drives our success, or failure, it doesn't mean we're broken. It means we're human.

GUNATILLAKE: This is important. Look back at a moment of struggle or 'failure' in your own life, are you able to see it as just being human. If you can't do that quite yet, how about you soften and take that as an invitation for the future?

TAYLOR: I want this to be the moment I learn how to overcome my anxiety. But it's not.

It's a strange feeling, watching my performance career wither away. I'm watching it, and I'm grieving at the same time.

I graduate college, and I know I have to find something else. I need to make a living. I can't become a burden.

I attend summer recording school. If I can't make music, maybe I can record it.

I learn how to mix, how to run sound for TV, and eventually, how to sound design. It doesn't have the same exhilaration of performing, but I start to discover the beauty of layering sounds together.

The anxiety doesn't vanish, but it changes. When I'm at my sound board and my hands start shaking, I can just take my fingers off the fader and no one knows. No roomful of people looking at me, waiting for me. I can keep it all in the dark.

It's my birthday. And my wife has a surprise for me. It's not new, in fact it's a present she got from an old, old friend from my band days.

I open the case. It's a trumpet.

Not just any trumpet. It's my friend Jeff's, from college in Arkansas. Even when I was flailing, he'd been the sweetest, most caring person. He always saw the humanity in me, not the brokenness. My heart fills. I'm grateful. But I'm also sad.

I tell my wife, "I'm probably not going to play this." She already knows. It had just felt wrong for me not to have a trumpet.

Sam pauses me mid-sentence, and she says, "Why don't you sit down."

The light blazes through the floor-to-ceiling windows. We're in the reception area, in the brand-new offices of the business that I own. We do sound design and mix for huge clients — TV networks, Emmy-winning shows, ads for the biggest brands in the world. But right now, I'm standing by the sleek new front desk in a space that's just ours. And I'm having a hard time.

My producer and I are working through a problem. And I know how many people are counting on me to get this right. I have a responsibility to every single person that works here. They count on me for their livelihoods. Their families need me to get this right. We're an ensemble. But I can still feel the heat of a spotlight, pinned just on me.

I talk really fast. My breathing is shallow and quick, I'm sucking for air. "Well, what about this?" I say, "And what about this?"

Sam looks at me, and she gets really calm. Which is weird. Usually we feed off of each others' energy. She says, "I think you're having a panic attack."

What? I've never applied those words to me before. Until now, I didn't think panic attacks were real.

Sam tells me to sit down and take some breaths. She's so thoughtful. The way she leads me through this.

She says, It's OK. We don't need to solve everything at this very moment. I watch the light flood into the rest of the room. The imaginary spotlight on me goes away. And I breathe.

For a while, I resist embracing this new label for what's been happening to me since college. And so, I start having more panic attacks. When there's something important I have to do. When I'm the center of attention. When everyone needs me to succeed. If I fail in those moments, it feels like I'm not worthy of any of the care and investment people have put in me.

If I fail, I feel like a burden. Like I was for my parents during their divorce. Like I was for all the teachers who invested in my success as a trumpet player.

Knowing what a panic attack is doesn't make it go away. But I finally, finally accept that they are real. I develop techniques to manage my stress when I start to feel panicky. Like making physical contact with myself, touching my arm, or my clothing. Focusing on the sensation grounds me. It reminds me to breathe.

I also begin to realize that what I'm going through is quite common. That it doesn't make me uniquely messed up, it's just another part of being human.

I sit with my oldest daughter, and her voice fills my ears. She's five, and she loves singing. She's so proud of herself. I don't want to do anything to get in her way. She's singing me a Daniel Tiger song, which is a Fred Rogers song. "It's you I like. It's not the things you wear, it's not the way you do your hair, but it's you I like..."

Something inside me just bursts. She can see me having this visceral, intense reaction. And she just smiles and says "Yeah! I love you, Daddy!" And suddenly I'm hit with the force of this unconditional love.

I have three children. And they don't need me to be anything besides who I am. Once I accept that unconditional love, I start to see that the same thing is true for a lot of the people in my life. My wife, who's been with me for 20 years. My work colleagues. Friends, who have no skin in the game besides their friendship. I'm loved by all these people, and I love them too.

My trumpet now lives near my daughters' playroom. It holds a fascination for them. Sometimes I let them play it. And sometimes not very often, but sometimes, I play it for them.

I take the trumpet out of its case. Its shape feel familiar, and still a mystery. The valves stick when I pick it up, so I move them to get them limber.

I put the instrument up to my mouth and the fear surges back. There's still so much baggage that comes with this motion. So much loss.

But I don't want to stain this moment with melancholy. I want my girls to have their own relationship with music. I want them to feel unconditional love. Like they can do anything. And if they can't do something, that's OK. It happens to all of us. It's just part of being a person.

I play goofy scales for my daughters on this trumpet, and "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." They're wowed. To them, the song is flawless.

And just like that, I can breathe again.

GUNATILLAKE: Thank you Dallas, for your story and for taking your trumpet out of its case for us. Those notes you were willing to risk sharing mean so much.

In his Meditative Story, Getting out of my own head, actor, writer and comedian, Aasif Mandvi comes to terms with his own vulnerability, when his body begins to put up stop signs that prompt him to ask. "what could life be like, if I wasn't trapped in my own head?" I invite you to check-out Aasif's episode, as well as Dallas's podcast "20,000 Hertz," via the links in our show notes.

Following a story about perceived failure, breath, people counting on you and the wisdom that comes from really reflecting on what you've been through, there's really only one meditation we can do together for our closing few minutes.

And it starts with breathing. So let's breathe.

Not doing anything to alter the breath.

What we are doing is pointing our attention on it. Making the sensations of breathing the most important thing to be aware of, just for a little bit.

Take your time to locate the breath with your awareness.

To know how you know it.

The breath can be a bit subtle sometimes to hold onto and so something we can do is literally hold onto it. Placing our hand on our belly, and knowing the breath here, with the sensations of the rising and falling of the belly.

Let's hand here for a little bit.

Again, not doing anything to the breath.

What we are actively doing is nudging our attention to rest with the breath.

Ok good.

What we're going to do next is count the breath, and do it in a particular way.

One on the in breath, one on the out breath.

Two on the next in breath, two on the next out breath and so on.

1, 1.

2, 2.

3, 3.

And so on.

And what I'd like us to try to do is get up to 10.

But if we get distracted in anyway away from the breath.

Being really honest about that with ourselves and starting again at zero.

Ok, so that's 1/1, 2/2 ... up to 10.

But starting again if we become distracted.

I'll leave you for a little bit.

How did you get on?

Most likely you didn't make it to 10.

Most people don't.

And if that happened to you, did it feel like failure?

But here's the thing.

This meditation technique isn't really about being able to make it to 10 without any distractions.

What it **is** about is noticing the distractions when they arise.

It's the noticing which is most important.

Since that is mindfulness.

Being aware of what is happening, noticing, knowing the mental processes of the mind.

And there are fewer more important processes to understand than distraction.

Because when we understand distraction, it becomes less powerful a pattern, and what is revealed underneath is a natural steadiness of mind.

So as Dallas shares, sometimes what can feel like failure can actually just be what we need to go through.

And on the other side is wisdom.

The breath.

The awareness.

The ability for us to know ourselves.

The fourth dimension of humanity.

Thank you Dallas and as ever and as always, thank you.