

Meditative Story Transcript – Kristin Windbigler (Soul Curriculum)

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Hi there. This is Rohan. And today we've got a special episode of Meditative Story. Actually, it's a complete experiment, and hey, you're invited along.

We've been thinking about what you've shared with us in our community surveys, and one of the things that comes up a lot is the interest in exploring the episode themes more deeply.

I told the team I'm well up for trying this, and we'd love to know what you think. After you listen, email us at hello@meditativestory.com and tell us if this test works for you. I'll remind you of that email at the end of the episode.

One of the reasons I love being part of Meditative Story is that it can really help deepen our understanding of ourselves. Think about it this way. Yes we go into other people's stories, but doing so holds a mirror up to our own lives, and our own transformative experiences.

And so in this episode — in this experiment — we're inviting back a storyteller who very recently shared their Meditative Story with us.

We're going to wind our way back through her story, and with her alongside me right here, we'll talk about the key themes in a way that I hope may just open up something special in you.

And if that happens, I'd say the experiment may just be worth a go for real. We'll make that decision with your feedback later.

And with that: the body relaxed. The body breathing. Your senses open. Your mind open. Meeting the world.

GUNATILLAKE: Kristin. Welcome back. How are you?

KRISTIN WINDBIGLER: I'm great. It's wonderful to be here.

GUNATILLAKE: If you remember Kristin Windbigler's story from last week, that's great. If not, that's no biggie. In it, she shares her coming-of-age story in rural North California. In love with the community and the country life around her.

One evening, gathered around the television with her mom and dad, Kristin watches a news report that suggests families like hers, living below the poverty line, are in critical need of help. What the TV journalist misses is that it's possible to live abundantly without a big paycheck, without the need for anything other than what the land and community already provide. The news report sends Kristin on a path to tell deeper, multi-dimensional stories that help us see that we're much more similar than we are different — all of us.

GUNATILLAKE: So, Kristin, what we're going to do in this episode is to listen back to some highlights and segments of your story. Are you okay listening to the sound of your own voice?

WINDBIGLER: I'm getting there. I made a deal with myself that I would listen to one minute, and then I listened to two minutes. Pretty soon, I had listened to the whole thing.

GUNATILLAKE: It's one of life's great curiosities, isn't it? Listening to the sound of your own voice. I'm afraid I'm going to put you through it again though. So what we're gonna do is revisit some moments where I reckon there's some real underlying wisdom to dig into. We'll keep it light and fun, but the idea is to reveal some of those gems, and how our listeners might reflect on your experience in their own lives.

In this moment of your Story, something really colorful and unusual descends on the front lawn of your home in rural Humboldt County California. And in response your neighbors rally to the occasion. Shall we listen?

WINDBIGLER: Yes, please.

WINDBIGLER: Out of nowhere, a flock of 50 peacocks have landed in the giant black walnut tree in our front yard. 50 peacocks!! They're glimmering in the sun and they're making that sound, that [squawking sound].

It seems the peacocks somehow escaped from the neighboring ranch in the middle of the night. And now they strut around the yard with their iridescent blue necks and bright green tail feathers. Hundreds of eyespots look straight at us. The whole scene is magical.

But it also means there's work to be done. How do you move a flock of peacocks? We call our neighbors, and the old man who lives there — he comes over to bring the birds back to homebase. We get busy working together because that's just how we all are here. We sort of live by a barter system: You help me this time and I'll help you next time. This time, it's peacocks. Next time, it's getting the road cleared. We all drop what we're doing to help someone who needs it.

I often joke that if your house is on fire, even your enemies will show up with buckets of water. We may have different opinions, we may see the world in completely opposite ways. But we have to make it work somehow. And when there is trouble, you have to come together. You're all each other have.

And so when the peacocks show up, you find yourself all doing this thing together — working hard, laughing, figuring out how to solve a problem. You're together in

the moment and living life — like, really living it. We're doing this thing together and it matters.

GUNATILLAKE: Now, Kristin, that is probably hands down the best peacock impression I've ever heard in my life. I have to recognize that. I was trying to think of times or moments when I've had an experience of that, people coming together with a bigger problem that no one can really solve by themselves. And the one that came to mind actually was I'd gone on a family trip. My mother had come up and, um, we'd gone out into the Scottish Highlands for a weekend.

And we were driving back and the snow came in to the point where all the three roads either way were impassible. But the great fortune was that in the middle of these three roads was a hotel. So suddenly, we checked into this hotel and there was a sort of an ad hoc community of about 80 people who were all in the same position of being snowed in.

And all of us just sitting around, having dinner in the sort of the bar area around the fires was such a great memory because you know, we were all trying to solve this problem. But because we all had this big, bigger problem than our own situation we had like an intimacy straight away.

It was like, we were instantly good friends. For that 48 hours, there was a real sort of magic connection there.

WINDBIGLER: There's something about the clarity that comes in that kind of crisis where everyone has to focus on the things.

It made me think of this time we were traveling with my mom to town. It's like an hour through a very rural place, there aren't a lot of people around and there was a woman standing out in the rain crying. And my mom's stopped. And we took her back to her campground. It was some sort of domestic dispute. But I had never seen my mom do anything like that, but I think she saw a woman who might be in a dangerous situation. And I think about it a lot. These are decisions that we all have to make all the time.

GUNATILLAKE: I guess the heart of that is "When does someone else's problem become your problem, right?" There's a lot of meditation practice and mindfulness practice about exploring this boundary of self and other. And a lot of that work is starting to see through some of those boundaries.

The more you get into mindfulness, the more you start to look at this stuff, the line between self and other. And over time that line becomes less solid. To the extent where our starting position is to see that which is shared rather than our differences, our judgements and comparisons. And when that does become our default way of being, the only natural result is kindness, generosity and community. Of course we need the labels

of self and other, me and you to operate in the world, but holding them too tightly has its costs.

Kristin, we're now going to listen to the moment when you first discover the trap of "us" vs "them," the perception that divides us from seeing each other for who we truly are.

WINDBIGLER: We gather around each week to watch the news shows.

Tonight they're covering a story that touches on poverty in America. They're talking about-what it means to fall "below the poverty line."

I've never heard these words before, but I'm ready to feel sad for these folks. Then they share exactly how much money you have to earn annually to be considered "below the poverty line." I look over at my parents, and I can tell from the expressions on their faces, that this is news to them. It turns out: WE live below the poverty line. Us.

It doesn't match up. We're happy. My life is so rich here, so how can we be poor?

I look to my parents for a sign that they agree, a sign that the broadcast got it wrong. They just giggle nervously at the broadcast. I try to laugh it off too, but I can't just move on. I don't have the words for it, but I know something is wrong. What the TV journalist misses is that it's possible to live abundantly without a big paycheck. My parents choose to live a different way here. We grow our own food, we make our own clothes. We don't need anything we don't already have.

After that broadcast, I start to see the world around me with new eyes. And I start to notice what's special about this place, what other people maybe don't understand.

And I decide: I'm going to be a journalist one day. I want to write and tell stories about Us. Where we come from. Because we don't see ourselves on TV or in the movies or in magazines. The country folk on TV are all stereotypes — like the Beverly Hillbillies. But there's so much more to us that people don't bother to see. We're not some 2-dimensional characters. Life isn't like those shows.

GUNATILLAKE: So, Kristin, that was such a compelling image of like, "Whoa, that's us they're talking about." And you know, you talked about the sort of Beverly Hillbillies stereotypes of country folk. Has it gotten better enough?

WINDBIGLER: I think that there is a concerted effort in the media to try to tell more stories from rural people. Our stories don't necessarily make it into the mainstream reporting especially when they aren't predictable stories or, you know, when they don't suit the stereotype.

And, you know, that's a lot of what we try to get at at the Western Folk Life Center and through the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering is our artists are also creating art from the lives that they're living, and that is much different than what most people are accustomed to seeing in TV westerns or movies. And don't get me wrong. Nobody loves a Western movie more than me, but those don't usually accurately reflect what people's lives are truly like.

GUNATILLAKE: When you're with someone who sees you as "other" than themselves, or holds a bias that stands in the way, and you're interested in closing that gap, how do you do that?

WINDBIGLER: I try to do it kindly. I think for me, language holds a lot of the keys. There are words that I sometimes sprinkle into conversation when I know that I'm talking to a tech person so that I can show that I have a little bit in me that's like them too. The same for when I'm meeting ranch folks around the west. I want them to know I'm not just this woman they think is from New York City or San Francisco, but I have a background that's similar to them.

GUNATILLAKE: We all in our own ways want to feel recognised and welcome but it is true that biases and blindspots get in the way of that. Being yourself and finding what is truly shared can be what it takes to soften those fears and bypass those biases. It's a form of wise action really, being authentic and pointing to what joins rather than to what divides.

Alright, Kristin, let's move to this next moment from your Meditative Story. You share a beautiful insight about the abundance that exists in country living and city living. Let's listen.

WINDBIGLER: Slowly I start to realize: There's so much I don't know yet about other people and how they see the world. For years, I've wrestled with the caricatures people paint of rural communities. I'm starting to realize I have my own stereotypes about city people.

But over those first months in San Francisco, The fog rolling out each morning. The sunny days when you can walk along the water. The experience of so much culture in one place.

My original beliefs start to melt away. Gratitude seeps in. I feel lucky as I leave the office after a long day. Maybe we're crammed into small spaces but how lucky am I to be surrounded by these fascinating people doing such important work?

I'm the cowgirl, but I'm definitely not the only character in this warehouse filled with city folk, building these new things called "Websites." The Wired office is filled with a combination of journalists, artists, geeks and hipsters. We use all kinds of colorful language. We celebrate creativity. Go out and do whatever – even if "whatever" means eating bear jerky at your desk. We'll cheer you on.

We're doing this thing together, and it matters.

GUNATILLAKE: Y'know. It can take a lot of energy to constantly keep differentiating with each other. "Country and city folk. Us and them." And this story reminds me actually of a time years ago I was on a kind of meditation retreat. I was supposed to be doing some walking meditation on a long, narrow sandy path but was taking a break, just playing around drawing stuff in the sand. I scratched out a line with a stick. I looked at it for a while and had a very clear insight: the line that separated both sides of it also joined them. In those days in San Francisco, Kristen, I think it feels a bit like that. Community is always available as a choice. We just have to see it and take it.

WINDBIGLER: Absolutely. And, you know, we had this common value that we shared and that is personal authenticity. The freedom to be really who you are. And this together with freedom of speech, and the democratization of ideas, and creativity and creative problem solving.

GUNATILLAKE: Yeah, you're absolutely right. There is a real flow and joy when we can be with others and not have to hold anything back. It's so rich, and maybe infectious in its own way.

In this next moment from your Meditative Story, you bring us to a breathtaking talk on the stage of the Cowboy Poetry Gathering. We come full circle, decades after that TV news report sent you on your path to tell the kind of stories that wash our differences away. Let's take in this scene together, shall we? And then we'll come back with closing thoughts.

WINDBIGLER: I stand in the back of the theater as Agee takes the stage. He sits on a wooden barstool with a microphone in hand — behind him, a mural of mountains painted on the wall. Agee's a fourth-generation Nevada rancher, but he doesn't look like the stereotypical cowboy. He has a big beard and a glint in his eye. This man radiates goodness.

Agee's telling us how he is working to save his family ranch. He shows us pictures from the early '70s when the land was overgrazed. The grass in the photos is depleted and bare. He didn't know that it could look any different. But he starts listening to other people — with outsiders — and they start listening to him. African scientists and Washington legislators and Nevada ranchers ... You wouldn't expect these folks to ever meet each other, much less solve a problem,

but they did. They all worked together to try something new, and the results were astonishing. The land came back. Life took on new forms. And everything — all the people and all the animals — benefited from the land's revival.

Agee ends with a quote from Chief Seattle: "All things are connected like the blood which unites one family."

I walk backstage to the control room and the Los Angeles–based camera crew are in tears. They've never heard a story like this on the news. "More people need to hear this story," they tell me.

And I think what moves them is the same thing I felt as a kid, helping to corral the peacocks. In that small, rural community, what happens to one person affects everyone. And this is true in a wider, deeper sense too. We're all connected. And when we work together toward a common goal, our differences fall away. And we get this soaring feeling of being really truly alive. We're doing this thing together — and it matters.

GUNATILLAKE: There's something about how you talk about it here, Kristin, which is, when you're in a context like that, be it the peacocks or Agee working on that land, and it starts coming together there's a natural joy, lightness, flow, you can feel it in the body and, you know, for me that's the clue. That's like your whole being going, "Yeah this is the thing." And it's sort of how the mindfulness process works.

You do something that takes a bit of energy, but you feel the benefit of it. And then that lubricates you to keep doing it. And this positive feedback loop is so important, and so with your cameraperson — that's what they're talking about. They like something's just happened in them, which is like oh there's a real connection to the story. And they're feeling something that's really meaningful to them. Yes. The practical story of how this land gets revitalized is really important, but I think for me what I hear that he's saying is, "More people need to feel like I'm feeling right now."

So Kristin, as festival organizers, is creating the conditions for this kind of magic something you intentionally try to do?

WINDBIGLER: We definitely do. Although a lot of it just happens on its own. You know, you try as hard as you can to get to the day when it all starts. And there are like 300 volunteers who help us make it happen.

And I think a lot of them are operating off of what you're talking about. And that is it makes us all feel good. It feels good to be together when we're curating. We always try to make sure that there are some surprises so that it isn't the same event every year. There's always something unexpected. They had an international program for a long time that I'm hoping to revive. We had Mongolian throat singers one year.

And as an attendee, this was before I worked there, it's one of my favorite memories of the gathering is, you know, watching this Cowboy Yodel. And I think there was an accordion and involved, and then the throat singing happening and there was some trading of hats and it was just, it was marvelous. It was mind blowing.

GUNATILLAKE: Yeah, there's some strong hat game in Mongolia, for sure.

WINDBIGLER: You know, and it is, it's a celebration of the things that we have in common and even in, you know, some surprising ways.

GUNATILLAKE: Thank you, Kristin.

WINDBIGLER: Well it was lovely to meet everyone, and always happy to be part of your experiments.

GUNATILLAKE: Y'know with Kristin on the show sharing her experience, I feel just that little bit more cowboy myself. Double denim isn't quite in my fashion wheelhouse, but never say never right?

In fact, Kristin is the third cowboy-related storyteller we've had in recent times. The poet Waddie Mitchell was first then Ghuan Featherstone talking about the awesome work he does in Compton. And because of the process of researching, working on the stories and all that, the internet gods made a decision that I was so into the cowboy life that all of a sudden my Instagram Ads changed away from being all about hipster sweaters to being exclusively selling me horsemanship courses in Colorado. Dear listener, I wasn't not tempted!

And I know that's all algorithms and whatnot but it does point me back to what is the main theme of Kristin's story.

That when we turn to them, the connections between me and you are always here. We do need our definitions, our labels, our allegiances in life, they help us navigate the world. But it takes work to defend them. Through practices like mindfulness and good old fashioned learning the hard way, we can however see that in our hearts that they are just a construction - maybe not as solid, fixed or important as we once thought. And what is left when they are seen through is the unity that is always here, the container of all things.

So with that, I'm going to sign off now and hope you enjoyed our experiment here today. Click on the link in the show notes to share your thoughts about the episode or email us at hello@meditativestory.com