

Meditative Story Transcript – Matthew Mercer

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MATTHEW MERCER: I'm discovering the real magic to this game is creating an immersive environment and then relinquishing control and letting my friends build new things on top of what I've created. The game takes crazy turns, but remains true to the rules of the world we're inhabiting. My friends roam the reality I've made for them, and I relish their journey.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Every Thursday night, Matthew Mercer leads his friends and millions of at-home viewers through a maze of goblins, spells, and enchantments as they journey together through a realm of their own creation. Matthew is co-founder and guide of Critical Role, one of the most beloved role-playing games channels on the internet. Matthew and his friends are among the best voice actors in the world. The eager audience is moved to laughter, tears — and gets to experience the comradery of like-minded friends having the time of their lives. As a big fan of video games and role playing games myself, I am so appreciative of Matthews's influence on the scene.

In today's Meditative Story, Matthew shares the origin of his love for role-playing games and what they opened up in him. And he explores the magic that ripples out when we risk sharing our passions with others. Get ready to roll as we enter the world of a true master.

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.

MERCER: Dan's parents are at work. A group of us pummel into his apartment after school. The apartment has a library-esque feel. The tan carpet. The dark wood bookshelves. The smell of fresh spring dryer sheets permeates the space — the exhaust of the laundromat is a few doors down.

I'm 13, and I live in Agoura Hills, California. My best friend Ian is a tiny, wiry kid with braces but he's secretly built like Bruce Lee and can fight like him too.

Ian and I've been invited over by a group of seniors from the Japanese anime and video game club. They're all on the track team, sporting Blue and Gold tracksuits. Ian and I are freshmen, and we couldn't believe it when they said: "Hey, do you want to join our game?"

I usually spend a lot of time on my own. My family is nomadic. We move at least once a year, from rental property to rental property.

My hobbies are very solitary. I'm an artist. I have sketchbooks filled with video-game characters like Sonic the Hedgehog that I've drawn and have with me at all times. I love comics. And I rip through classic science fiction tales from Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov and every facet of fantasy.

At a garage sale, my parents pick up my first role-playing game: Dungeons & Dragons, or D&D. I sit cross-legged on my bed with the books for hours to begin to understand how the game works. There's a basic framework where a group can go on a heroic journey together from your own living room. The roll of dice determines the players' fate.

In Dan's house we each create our own character — their backstory, strengths, traits, possessions, and history. I can become anyone I want and, for a few hours, fully embody them. I've always been a loner — off on my own island. Until now. We follow the older kids' lead and spread out across the tan carpet and form a circle.

My militant wizard, Trent, seeks opportunities to engage with the people and story of the realm, eager to uncover the mysteries hidden within. I am told to chill out, as we're just fighting monsters for gold. I wish to describe how to bend the elements to my will and shape the land around me. I am slightly derided for my efforts as the others roll to seduce the bar wench.

As the adventure progresses, my expectations are at first disappointed and then shatter entirely.

This world we're constructing — turn by turn — feels hollow. This is our opportunity to find fellowship. To explore another realm. To collectively create a story that we're all a part of. But instead we're making fart jokes and slaying the endless series of barbarians who keep popping out from behind every bush.

I long for a sweeping mythology. The intrigue of rediscovering hidden truths from the deep, ancient, past. I love archeology and paleontology and am enthralled with the idea of magic.

Our characters leave the magical world and travel to modern-day Earth and eat at an In-N-Out burger, to level up their powers ... because it's a dumb joke?

I gaze out the window on the left side of the room that overlooks a large hill and the neighborhood houses. The daylight slowly begins to fade as we play into the evening. But at this point, I'm just going through the motions.

The Dungeon Master, the person in charge of steering us through the game feels selfish. He runs the game for himself, and I feel like a pawn for his own fantasy fulfillment.

I'm not very confident in most of my life. But I have a feeling I can create something better. I think I have it in me.

A few weeks later, I sit with a group of my friends in a circle at the foot of my bed. We've been here for hours in my dimly lit bedroom, rolling dice, laughing, being silly and enthralled.

My tiny computer with the dial-up modem sits in the corner alongside my Super Nintendo and Playstation.

This time, I'm the Dungeon Master. I spend weeks creating this world. I draw up maps. I figure out ways to tweak the circumstances so that everyone at the table is able to show up and accomplish what matters to them — whether that's power or conquest or discovery or friendship.

I look around the circle to see the feisty assortment of characters my friends have created. A cunning pickpocket mage built by my cousin, a powerful archer helmed by my friend Todd, and a wandering swordsman with the ambitions to become a martial arts grandmaster after his parents' death, played by Ian.

I describe the stale scent of wet hay and dried, spilled beer that mingles with the burning oil from within the dingy bar's lanterns, and watch my friends grow quiet and attentive. I engage them with a haughty, textured, British voice as a bounty hunter who noticed their weaponry and is in desperate need of sellswords to help find their quarry before it finds them, and I hear them engage in kind just as conversationally, pulled from their shell and into the story a little further.

I pay attention to every detail. Not just the heroes and the villains but the people who are just trying to survive amongst it all. The common folk of the village. The people that are trying to keep the tavern clean, the people that are trying to make sure the horses have horseshoes that don't hurt them.

I'm discovering the real magic to this game is creating an immersive environment and then relinquishing control and letting my friends build new things on top of what I've created. The game takes crazy turns, but remains true to the rules of the world we're inhabiting. My friends roam the reality I've made for them and I relish their journey.

We're a posse. Something I've never had before. I've had friends here and there, but this sense of unity and camaraderie is entirely new.

Outside this room, we're all awkward kids who don't go to parties or play on the football team. We so don't fit in that we don't even try. It fuels my intense criticism of myself and my embarrassment about my occasional stutter or scalp medication. But in this room, we find comfort in just doing our own thing. We don't feel different or cast out. Through our adventures, I learn it's okay not to strive for the expectations that have been socially pressed on us forever. We love the same things. Things that make us happy. We're all just excited to be here.

Ian rolls a D20 and the dice and it lands on the number 20 — a perfect, critical roll. Everyone jumps and screams in a communal cheer. Our campaign continues well after sundown, long into the night.

GUNATILLAKE: There is a lot of flow and joy here. Matt and his friends so comfortable with each other, on great adventures and now a perfect roll! Reflect on a friend in your life who brings you that sense of ease. Smile and notice the joy and flow that is with you now.

MERCER: With each game I construct, I'm advancing just as much as my friend's characters' are. I start to come more out of my shell.

I've played the role of an introverted artist kid my whole life. Now, by exploring all these other characters, I begin to find a new voice.

I stand on the edge of the auditorium stage, waiting for my name to be called. I'm auditioning for the school play, and I'm nervous as hell. I glance around at the other students, many much older and confident than I. They fill the auditorium. The smell of chicken and fries lingers from the lunch kitchen that sits adjacent to this assembly hall. None of these kids know me. They're all drama kids who are part of the drama clique.

Mr. Kilpatrick is the only reason I'm here. He's the theater teacher: a jovial man in his 40s with short black hair, a salt-and-pepper beard, and round glasses that frame his face in a teacherly way. Last week, Mr. K saw me sitting on a bench outside the school, waiting for Dad to pick me up. He works a lot, so I often have to sit there for an hour or so. I don't mind, though. I spend the time sketching and dreaming up new characters.

"What're ya drawing, Matt?"

I've never had an adult ask me about it. I cautiously begin telling him about the sketches in my book.

I show him the sallow, untrusting expression of Cyriok Glimmel, a dark noble with dark aspirations who has been taunting my players. I proudly show an in-progress sketch of a terrifying, bestial demon I called "The Evervore," the numerous spikes that protruded from its thick, oily mane but one of its predatory capabilities.

He seems into it. He's the first adult outside my parents who tells me this stuff I'm drawing is cool. So I start telling him everything. And he sees something in me.

By the end of our conversation, he's convinced me to try out for the school's production of Arther Miller's "The Crucible."

Just like in D&D, I have to put myself into the shoes of the characters and imagine how they'd react to the turmoil and chaos happening all around them.

On stage, I'm reading for the part of Reverend Hale. I stand in my baggy jeans and my long collared shirt. I like him because he's genuinely one of the good hearts in this story. He's trying to do his best, yet still failing. I feel that vibe pretty strongly.

When it comes time to read, I take a deep breath in. I have spent a lot of my life not taking risks. Not placing myself in danger of discomfort or embarrassment.

But right now, I want to take the leap. I might make a fool of myself. I might get the part. Or both! Stepping forward, here in this world not surrounded by my friends, becomes an alluring challenge.

Three days later, I walk up to the sheet posted on Mr. K's door before class. The thrill of the audition is gone. Now, I'm just scared. I look up, begin scanning the list, and immediately see that I've landed the part! I'm playing Reverend Hale as a sophomore!

Going to rehearsals, I start to feel a similar rush as leading a D&D campaign in my bedroom.

I feel free. I feel alive. My brain takes a break from the self-criticism and lets me just be someone else for a little while.

I'm not looking inward when I'm wearing a costume. I'm not judging myself when I'm reciting my lines or hanging out with other kids in the play. Outside of this auditorium, we have a lot of different interests. But here — we're in it together. We're enjoying something that we share, and that helps bridge the gaps between us.

Discovering my love of D&D turns my friends into a posse. Discovering my love of theater connects me to a bunch of new people who share that passion. Doing something that I love and putting it out into the world is like putting up a beacon — it sends out a signal that only my people see. It helps us find each other in the darkness.

GUNATILLAKE: What if Matt's beacon from this moment is still out there, can we feel it? Notice any heat in the body. Perhaps on the face, or in the chest? Spend a moment to reflect on your own most burning passions. This is your beacon to put out into the world to see what magic unfolds.

MERCER: After high school, I get an apartment in LA. I try on the role of aspiring actor working a day job. I live paycheck to paycheck. My auditions go nowhere. I try to make new friends, but the only people I see are those I work with.

I mostly keep my passions to myself. Most people don't get it. They either give me the side-eye or get confused about why I would still play "silly dice-rolling games." It still comes with a lot of judgment.

Sitting at my computer in my tiny apartment, I type in my screen name and password and wait to hear the familiar sound of the dial-up modem. That signature crackle of AOL trying to make a connection fills me with anticipation for the evening ahead.

Online is the only place I can find people who are into role-playing games.

"Welcome. You've got mail."

I click into the RPG.net forums and start chatting.

But meeting people in chat rooms and playing online, it's not the same.

I miss the spark that comes from seeing the other people's faces at the table. I miss watching my friends light up at a reveal, catching the glimmer in their eye when they connect the lore with a mystery. That cheer, that communal cheer, when a dice rolls a natural 20 and everyone jumps from their seats and screams. I long for that.

My Mapquest printouts lead me to a 100-year-old colonial-style house on the east side of Los Angeles. The place is completely run down in the best Addams Family way possible. It totally leans into the aesthetic of kids screaming and running away at Halloween.

The home belongs to my new friends Caddy and Jenn. We met through a mutual friend, Taleisin. Taleisin is a Puck-like figure wrapped in the body of your classic '90s, early 2000s goth kid. He's a wonderfully charismatic, performative, open-hearted figure dressed in black and white stripes, dark leather coat, colored mohawk. He's also the nicest person in the whole world.

Caddy opens the front door and ushers us into the foyer. The house itself is a character. Dark red carpets. The most magnificent Tim Burton-esque appearance. Colorful paintings all over the walls evoke circus nightmare-like imagery. Somehow it all seems so playful and fun, though.

After a grand house tour that includes a mummified cat as a centerpiece, we take our seats at the table. It's a whole crew of confident, attractive nerd folk from different backgrounds and different body types. Strange, wonderful people with that specific kind

of energy that's drawn to this city. A magical, delightful patchwork tapestry of color and oddity. Everyone is so sure of themselves — and so sure of their passions.

A wave of self-doubt rises up in me. I wonder why I'm here, why they even invited me. But soon, I'm swept into this new world in fellowship with these wonderful people. The harsh critic quiets down. It feels like I'm home after a long time away.

Tonight we're playing Exalted. It's a game system inspired by high fantasy anime of the '90s and 2000s. We are all super powerful heroes that can do crazy things, in and out of battle. We bust out the dice and begin to discuss our characters. Their abilities, their backgrounds, their castes — which in this world are based on phases of the sun.

Sitting around the table, I feel like I'm in the midst of a very well-oiled troupe of traveling performers about to put on an amazing show. Everything and everyone is theatrical.

Suddenly we are all bastions of power and possibility in the middle of a tense ballroom negotiation, seeking a particular politician to poison in secret in hopes of ending an oppressive reign and enacting a necessary change for an abused people. We work out our plans, bluff our way into the inner sanctum of the fascist powers, we stumble and find ourselves in danger of losing it all, and rapidly a series of clever choices and climactic dice rolls enable us to accomplish our goal and fight our way to freedom.

As the story arc takes shape, I sit back and think, "Wow, I didn't expect any of this to happen. This is so much better than anything I could have written by myself, sitting hunched over my own little desk."

We play off of each other. We build relationships amongst our characters, and with each other. We flesh out this world together. It feels like the wildest, most unexpected creative collaboration.

It's electric.

In this spooky, warm, inviting space at Caddy and Jenn's house, I realize this is the experience I've been searching for. And over the course of our adventure, I realize, once I find the right people, I'm thriving. I'm surrounded by people I trust, and new people that I'm learning to trust. I leave the house, laughing. Joyful. Confident.

My cloud of insecurity dissipates. The idea of talking about my passions publicly becomes a lot less scary. Instead, I'm excited to do it all of a sudden. I find confidence that if I share my passion, it'll draw people like me to me. It'll be that beacon that helps my people find me — and help me find them.

My passion is fantasy-filled worlds, full of mystery and camaraderie, created with friends. But I suspect we each have deep parts of ourselves that remain hidden. Passions that

could allow us all to send up beacons, drawing our people to us, if we only dare to share ourselves with them.

I sit in my casting agency, waiting to go into the recording booth. Another actor walks in and introduces himself to me, Zack. He's got more experience than me, and he looks like a serious actor. Broad-shouldered, built, shaved bald head, black tight T-shirt. He's a very nice fellow. We shake hands and begin to talk. I think, "Who am I? I'm a longhaired nerd kid."

He asks what I do for fun. And I decide to tell the truth — in a tentative way. I say, "I'm a video gamer, and I sometimes play D&D with my friends and nerd stuff like that."

I know things could go one of two ways. I could completely lose him, turning this into an embarrassing moment that he's going to tease me about every time he sees me in the agency.

But instead, his eyes glimmer. He leans in towards me and says, "Did you say you play Dungeons & Dragons?" I nod, slowly.

A smile lights up his face as he begins to excitedly tell me about the campaigns that he played in when he was in high school and college. How much he loves role-playing games and has been wanting to Dungeon Master a game for some time. How challenging it's been to get a game together when we're all building careers and families.

Within a few weeks, we're sitting down to lunch and figuring out how to co-run a game. We decide which friends to invite. The campaign we start dreaming up together at that table ... it runs for two years. It forges lifelong friendships. And it changes the course of my entire life.

When I look back at my life so far, I see all these little connective dots that brought me from one experience into the next.

Each one opened me up further to finding joy in what I do and finding others I can share it with.

For me, I love who I become when I play role-playing games. Someone who is sure of himself. Someone who helps others. Someone who's useful. I suspect many of us have something that does that for us.

It's risky to open up and shine your light out into that world. But the impact is enormous. It enables someone to be drawn in and find a world they've longed to know. A world where they fit right in and belong instantly. A world where the things that make them a little bit weird or strange are what other people want at the table.

Not everyone will understand our passions, but their reaction isn't for us to shoulder. The ones who do understand, maybe they'll feel the permission to explore what makes them the happiest. I just want to put out a beacon that'll draw in people like me. So I can lead people to a table where they already have a seat.

GUNATILLAKE: Matt, thank you. I loved that.

Those people who are inextricably drawn to us when we allow ourselves to be seen are so vital. In his episode, "Through friendship, a better version of myself," Reid Hoffman describes his own growing up years, how he banded together with a group of misfits, and how those friendships ultimately became the root of who he is today. We've left a link to Reid's Meditative Story in today's show notes if you'd like to check it out.

As a fan of so-called Actual Play videos and podcasts myself, I've followed Matt's work for several years now, and he is a true master. If you're not familiar with "Critical Role" and other communities like it, they are incredible and in recent times have become increasingly mainstream. It takes a remarkable set of skills to be able to craft worlds that then become the platforms for others to play upon. And to do it with a quality that attracts millions of devoted fans.

So what does a D&D meditation look like? That is what's on my mind, that is my inquiry as I start to think what platform I might craft for our closing practice together.

And what I think we'll do is three mini-practices inspired by how the role playing games that Matt knows so well, work.

And as ever, you are very welcome, very welcome to soften the face, let go of any tension in your shoulders or hands. Sigh if you need to sigh. Because sometimes we just need to sigh. To let go of that which has gone before to make space for what is to come. To let it go out of the body.

When you play games like Dungeons & Dragons you of course play a character, and each character is derived from what is called a class. Your class defines the kind of things you can do, your strengths, your skills. Y'know examples of classes are: rogue, wizard, sorcerer, fighter, ranger, cleric, druid, bard. Some are magic users, some are more combat oriented, others more dependent on guile and chicanery. Classic fantasy narrative stuff. You then build your character on top of it, bringing our own backstory, detail, style, personality, your own vibe.

When you strip things back a little bit, what is your class? Is there a category or type of person that you and others recognize you as? For me I might say my class is Busy Dad or Wannabe Wizard. What is yours?

And as you sit, lie down, stand, move here, can you feel that class in the bodymind? How is it showing up in how you're feeling, in what your experience is?

And can you also notice aspects of your experience that are nothing to do with that class, nothing to do with that definition of yourself? Bigger than that.

In his role as Dungeon Master or DM, Matt is both composer and conductor. He is also a creator of worlds. So let's explore ours.

Eyes closed if that is safe and feels ok, what is this world like?

What is the terrain like?

Is it a busy landscape of thoughts and sensations, or is there more of a sense of spaciousness?

Scanning the body, noting what is in here in the mind, is there a quest calling out? Any areas of experience standing out and inviting investigation.

Maybe a tricky bit of tension, or a soft warm feeling or a persistent thought pattern or distraction.

Turn to it, and see where the adventure takes you.

When I watch Matt do what he does, the thing that strikes me is the emergent gameplay. How with his fellow players he helps create the conditions for the wonderful to arise. Also how he's able to roll with whatever arises and find magic in it.

So let's take this attitude into our meditation here.

Whatever comes up in experience, not pushing it away, but being open to it. Interested in how it may lead you into something else.

Thoughts, sensations, memories, feelings, whatever is here.

Knowing what is here, the attention leaning forward, being interested in the detail, and knowing what is revealed next in this chain of moments.

To close, I want us to come back to Matt's beautiful pointing-out that in order to forge community often we have to put out a beacon, and through its natural gravity and maybe a little bit of magic, it will draw people to a place where they already belong.

So let's do that. In whatever way is meaningful to you, let's send out a beacon right now, a beacon transmitting that which we care about and that matters to us — however minor or niche it might seem. Sending it out.

North. East. South. West. Below us and above.

May all be well. May all be happy.

May we all know community.

May we all find our seat.

May we all play games together.

And may we all roll a nat 20 every now and then.

Thank you Matt.

And thank you. Play well.