

## Meditative Story Transcript – Nataly Dawn

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**NATALY DAWN:** My teacher, Madame Ritter, decides that I can fumble my way through math or science with my limited language skills. But when it's time for French, she looks at me and motions towards the door. I get up, grab my things, and walk past the rows of desks. I walk down a dark hallway and exit the building. It feels like a walk of shame. I cross a courtyard, then enter a small stone structure and climb a dark, wooden stairwell. The stairs creak as I walk up. I take my time relishing this moment alone, away from staring eyes.

**ROHAN GUNATILLAKE:** As a child, Nataly Dawn coasts through life, until at age 10 her family moves from Los Angeles to a tiny town in the middle of France. Being a rock-bottom beginner demolishes her ego. In the process, her mind opens in unexpected ways. In this episode of Meditative Story, the singer-songwriter who is one-half of the band “Pomplamoose” shows us how she learns to quieten her inner-critic and cultivate a beginner’s mindset as a doorway to connection and joy.

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.

**DAWN:** The slanted morning light warms up the red cobblestones on the path in front of us. I’m 10, and my father is walking me to my new school, in my new town, in France.

He turns to me and says, “What’s the rule?” as we get close to this weathered wooden gate.

“Do your best, and have fun,” I say back. My dad is a pastor, so he’s good at giving pep talks, but I don’t really buy it. I know today will be full of strange foods I’ve never seen before. And full of words I don’t understand. And I’m right.

We walk into the school and head straight to the principal's office. My cheeks go flush with embarrassment as he tells me that I have to repeat fifth grade while I learn to speak French. It’s humiliating.

And the first day in class, it gets worse. I can’t understand anything the teacher says. Even the English teacher doesn’t speak English.

Back in my old life in Los Angeles, fifth grade is easy. I get straight As. I sing in the school choir. My best friend lives next door. Here, I'm bad at everything.

Even recess feels weirdly disorienting. In LA, we play foursquare and board games. Here, kids bring ping-pong paddles to school. Girls gallop around the courtyard pretending they're horses. I'm the only girl who hasn't taken horse-riding lessons.

Within the first week, I get very good at telling my teachers, "j'ai mal a la tête" ("I have a headache") so I can get a break to go sit somewhere quiet and be sad.

When we first arrive in Tours, this new town where my parents are missionaries, we live in the basement apartment of a very small, very old building. The floors are so crooked that if you take a ball and you put it at one end it just slowly rolls to the other end of the room. There are low stone doorways you have to duck through. Even at 10, I feel too tall for France.

I miss California. But then it dawns on me. I can't go home. The idea of never fitting in scares me.

At night when I lay in bed, my whole body aches. Our beautiful Calico cat, Cleo, that we brought from LA, leans against me as I cry as my mom rubs my legs.

She says it's "growing pains." Perfect.

My teacher, Madame Ritter, decides that I can fumble my way through math or science with my limited language skills. But when it's time for French, she looks at me and motions towards the door. I get up, grab my things, and walk past the rows of desks. I walk down a dark hallway and exit the building. It feels like a walk of shame. I cross a courtyard, then enter a small stone structure and climb a dark, wooden stairwell. The stairs creak as I walk up. I take my time relishing this moment alone, away from staring eyes.

I pause, take a deep breath, and step into my new classroom. Drawings hang from the dark wood walls, and there are little kids sitting cross-legged on the floor. They send me to learn French with the first graders!

Instead of spending time with kids my own age I'm with their little brothers and sisters. How can this be happening? What would my friends back home think? I'm forced to be an absolute beginner. It's so embarrassing.

The little kids' classroom has the shade of a big oak tree from the courtyard. The windows sit wide open, and it's cooler than my other class. They are learning to write their letters, and I join in.

Everything in France is handwritten, and the school system is precise about penmanship. We use actual fountain pens. We practice the perfect loops required for our Ls and our Ps. As I start to draw the letters, I relax a little bit. I'm good at drawing. A boy sitting on my left peeks over as I draw the letter "L" and smiles. I'm a little embarrassed, but also, for the first time, not completely failing at this task.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Being a beginner can be uncomfortable for all of us. But it's a stage we must move through. Often the imagined fear of what others might think begins to fade into the background as we take small actions. If you're learning something new at the moment, what small actions can you take to make that progress?

**DAWN:** Later in the week, we sing nursery rhymes. Through the rhymes, we learn to conjugate verbs together. Even though I don't speak French well, I'm good at singing, because I've grown up harmonizing with my mother and singing in church. It turns out singing in French is a lot easier than speaking French. I go to sleep at night humming the French that I learned that day.

Everyday as my peers watch me leave my classroom, I think: I'm the oldest and the worst at everything.

But over time, something interesting happens. They're so excited to see me, and to share a book, a toy, a drawing, a song. As they surround me, my mood shifts. They play with my hair and sit on my lap. We develop a fondness for each other that cuts across language. They love to look at books with me. To teach me. I feel how much they want me to learn. I don't feel judged by these kids. They make me feel less like an outsider and more like part of a family. They too are absolute beginners. We're in it together in this space set up just for us.

One day when leaving school, a first grader I sit next to waves goodbye and squeals with joy, "A demain, Nataly!" ("I'll see you tomorrow Nataly"). Her brother, my peer, stares at me. For the first time, I don't feel embarrassed. My little friend's expression of joy and excitement is bigger than my feeling of shame.

The more time I spend with the first graders, the less I feel horrible about being bad at French and the more I realize that no one expects me to be good. Everybody just expects me to be a beginner.

By the end of the fall semester, my mal-a-tetes stop. It turns out I love calligraphy, the way the quill scratches and glides across the lines of paper. My penmanship becomes beautiful, and this keeps me engaged. My French picks up speed, and soon, I'm far ahead of my parents.

Eventually the newness of everything stops scaring me. It starts to feel fun.

Even in church, things are so different here. They drink real wine for communion, and they use a real metal chalice instead of paper cups. I watch my parents during the service. Their faces remind me that this move to a new place, a new culture has made them absolute beginners too.

I'm learning from this first year in France: when you allow yourself to be a beginner — when you create the space for yourself to truly learn — then you get the joy of discovery without the weight of your own expectations.

After eight years in France and Belgium, I move back to the U.S. to go to Stanford. As I walk into my freshman dorm for the first time I notice sideway glances. I'm a tall, skinny Euro-trash girl with super short bangs and a mullet. My clothes are brands no one has heard of. I look weird. I have an implacable vaguely European accent. I don't understand Greek life or the grading system. It's all a foreign language to me. The gorgeous, sunny, palm-tree covered campus looks like a movie set about an American University. And I feel like an outsider all over again.

And also feel like I'm failing. When I get my first graded paper back for Introduction to the Humanities, it's marked up in red. It's well-written, but it's the wrong format. This just isn't how you write papers here. My face flushes red; I feel humiliated.

Now that I'm a bit older, being a beginner is uncomfortable. Painful even.

I decide to do a special program where you get your MA and BA in four years. I know that I want to Master in French Literature, and that requires a ton of reading, so I pick a major that requires no reading: studio art.

I've been serious about my music for years, but art's just a hobby. I'm not that good at painting. I'm not amazing at photography. Once again I'm coming in at ground level.

Eventually I sign up for a sculpture class, because I'm drawn to woodworking. I get this idea of doing rogue public installations. I want to install a piece of art — in the middle of the night — without asking anyone's permission and just leave it there and see what happens. I set out to build a giant ladder leaning up against Hoover tower in the middle of campus. At midnight, two friends and I quietly haul the three ladder segments onto the lawn in front of the giant structure. It's a warm, balmy night. But I'm sweating because I'm scared. We finally manage to get the ladder up, and it barely holds together. I take a few photos as proof, but it looks pretty awful. I don't take into account the fact that there are security cameras everywhere. And by early the next morning, campus security takes it down. Like it's gone, it just disappeared. It's a complete failure.

I had nothing to show for my hours of work. It was just a poorly executed idea. And everyone in the class knew it. What was I even doing here? I feel like an imposter.

I have ideas for more installations swirling around in my head, but I'm really bad at executing them. There's no one in the art department who can actually teach me how to build the things I want to build.

I recognize I'm not that good at this yet. I need to create a space away from everyone else — like the first grader's classroom where I learned French. I need to stop pretending that I know how to do this. I need to just let myself be a complete beginner and start from scratch.

So I do some research and find a woodworking shop in south Palo Alto. One afternoon I awkwardly load my heavy cruiser bike onto the Caltrain, go four stops, and ride to the warehouse. It has giant steel roll-up doors. When I walk in, there's a small office to the side and a large, open space with scary looking machines used for cutting wood.

The owner, Gary is a gruff and exacting cabinet maker in his 50's. He has gray hair, and tanned leathery skin. He's very matter of fact. I know nothing about woodworking and he doesn't usually take apprentices. But he needs a website, and I can build that for him. He relents. The first thing he gives me is a small stainless steel ruler with tiny measurements on it. It feels lightweight and solid in my hand.

Pointing to it, he says, "You gotta keep this on you all the times, because the most important measurement is an eighth of an inch."

Afternoons and weekends, I return to the warehouse. The place is rigorously organized. Everything is always in its place. It smells like varnish. Gary won't let me touch the table saw. Mostly, I help with assembly and installing. We don't just eyeball stuff, I measure ... measure ... measure ... measure again. Then Gary appears to check my work.

He isn't ok with me leaving sawdust on the floor. "Sweep it up. Keep a clean workstation," he says. "There are no shortcuts." I wasn't used to the bar being this high. Actually I prided myself in trying to find the fastest shortcut. Getting the biggest pay off for the least amount of work. I hate waiting for the glue to dry completely before taking off the clamps. I'm his impatient apprentice. But Gary teaches me the devil is in the details.

I came to Gary knowing that I wanted to be a beginner. But I didn't really want to do the work. I didn't understand the time it takes to go from being a beginner to being skilled.

Every other medium I've worked in before this, I've leaned into because it's forgiving. I really like oil painting because if you mess up you can just wipe it off with some turpentine and start over.

But here, we only get to cut this wood once. It's expensive. Gary runs a small business. There's a responsibility that's intimidating. I'm not just slapping a ladder together and calling it art. So precision and care become my own ladder to hold onto as I'm learning.

Something about this precision reminds me of calligraphy. It's really satisfying. A whole new world is opening up to me.

**GUNATILLAKE:** For Nataly, working with precision brings satisfaction. Where in your life might you explore bringing precision to see what it unlocks for you? Without judgment. Embracing the mindset of a beginner.

**DAWN:** One day, I'm walking to the art department through this little grove of trees. It feels like a respite from campus. Suddenly you're on a dirt path with sunlight barely streaking through the tree branches and birds chirping overhead. I notice an area where the trees form a circle around a small clearing. It feels like a secret world, or where a cult ritual might happen. I think to myself: what I'd really like to do is put a cabinet on that redwood tree.

It feels just like the *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, a world full of mythical creatures and surprise. It's a return to my mischievous idea of stealth installation. But this time, I don't want the impulsiveness of the project to take away from the craft.

So I tell Gary my idea. And as usual, he's practical, specific, precise.

The project's confounding. Gary's never installed a cabinet on a curved irregular surface.

"Okay," he says, furrowing his brow. "You're going to need to calculate the circumference of the tree, because you aren't putting it on a flat surface. It's a rounded surface. So first you calculate how to cut the wood, so that it actually fits up against the tree the way it should." He tells me: "Get these measurements."

When I come to Gary with problems, he helps me solve them. But he isn't going to do this project for me. The installation, the building. That's my job. The first draft isn't right. It isn't precise enough. After weeks of persevering, we eventually put a small two-door cabinet right at eye-level on the redwood. There's a tiny shelf in the middle. When you open up the cabinet doors, you see the shelf and then behind it just tree bark. It's magnificent. There's no back. It's beautiful. It's structurally sound, and it feels meaningful.

Then something unexpected happens. When I go back a week later, and open up the cabinet, someone has put some shiny coins on the shelf. I return again and see other objects: a figurine, a pine cone. It's like a small treasure trove.

Months later, having dinner at a friend's dorm, I overheard a girl say, "Do you know about the secret cabinet attached to the redwood tree in the grove? You have to see it!"

I can't believe it. Everything inside me lights up. This thing I made has a life of its own. People are drawn to it. I feel like I'm a part of something that is bigger than my original intention, bigger than myself. It's the closest I get to having a real sense of purpose in the world: This feeling, when I make a piece of art that resonates with people.

Working with Gary, I tap into a true, deep curiosity. I realize that if I dig deeper, I might find something completely new, something worth the effort. I go from thinking, "I need to work hard every day," to "I get to be curious!" I seek out experiences where the act of learning is fulfilling in and of itself.

Several years after graduating, I'm visiting LA.

At this point, I've been writing original songs for 15 years. But each time I pick up my instrument, I doubt that I'm capable of creating something new.

I ask a friend who lives there if I can borrow his guitar. He drops it off one evening at my Airbnb. When I strum the beautiful, old instrument, I'm surprised that it's tuned completely differently than anything I've used. The finger patterns I know for chords don't work. It forces me to play around and find the sounds that I want to make. The easy thing to do is to re-tune the guitar. Instead, I embrace it. I just start to see what happens. I hum a note with my voice and then let my fingers travel up and down the frets until I find it. Then I decide to re-tune a string to another key, and I do it all over again. I'm making sounds that are almost absurd. But I love how I can start from scratch and make something totally unexpected.

Once you become familiar with something, you actually have to create the space to become a beginner again, and again and again. When you leave your comfort zone, there is a sense of mystery. A challenge. In that space where you push yourself, you are finally able to make discoveries.

There's no ego, just curiosity. Each surprise yields joy. I ask myself, "Where does this melody want to go?" An accidental note leads to an idea. And that idea gets refined until all the pieces fit together. When I work this way, I get to blend the mindset of being an absolute beginner with precision around each note I try and then retry. Over time, I choose to write a whole album this way.

Sometimes it's a relief to just fully admit that we are new at something. We're so determined to avoid shame. We want to take the easy way. But sometimes that just means not really engaging. Not getting to experience the untethered thrill of the unfamiliar.

When we drop into a beginner mindset, and create a space where it's okay that we don't have any clue what we're doing, that extinguishes our expectations. And when that happens, the world awaits.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Thank you Nataly, that was really lovely.

Nataly's story reminded me of one of the most influential meditation books of the last 50 years, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki. "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few" — what a great line. So the cost of not being a beginner is less openness.

But it's more than that in Nataly's story. When she writes French, when she plays a guitar strung to a different key, she is doing things which she thinks are familiar but with freshness and the delight that comes with that, new pathways open up.

So of course for our closing meditation together, let's do a bit of that.

We're going to do a practice together that I suspect you've never done before.

It works best if you've got your eyes open. To be honest it only really works if you've got your eyes open. But it can also work in the dark.

Blink.

Now blink again.

That's it. That's what we're doing. Blinking and knowing what it feels like.

Blink.

Blink again.

Letting the simplicity of this sensation bring you into the now of your body.

We spend so much of our day looking at things. And to ensure our eyes don't dry out, we automatically blink to keep them as refreshed as possible. So for this short time together, we're going to notice each time we do.

Making the experience of blinking the most important thing in our universe right now.

Blink.

Blink.

Letting the eyes be open, and knowing what it is to blink. Mindfulness, presence reasserting itself with each blink.

Blink.

Blink.

Blinking is pretty interesting. We can do it on purpose if we want. We can stop it happening if we want (for a little while at least). But it also just happens by itself. Just like breathing.

Letting this most tiny and ordinary of actions bring you back into the moment.

Blink. And know that you are blinking.

Not doing anything special. Just noticing blinking whenever it happens.

And noticing what happens when you notice. Noticing how the visual field is when you include the simple sensations of blinking.

Blink.

Blink.

Paying attention to the sensations of blinking. Falling in love with them if that makes any sense.

And seeing what you can notice about the area around the eyes. Do they feel tired? Or dry? Or do they feel relaxed? Can there be some precision here with the attention — the precision which was so important to Nataly in her woodwork?

Just carrying on with what you're doing. And when you remember to, just noticing blinking. Playing with the idea of foreground and background. Keeping the blinking in the foreground and everything else in the background.

And now if you can, letting everything else be in the foreground and blinking in the background.

We're all beginners here. Just smile. And blink.

Blinking. You remember you are here.

Blinking. You connect with your body.

Blinking. You explore modes of attention.

Traditionally the automatic natural process that has been used in meditation has been breathing. But blinking is just as good. It's always available. Over 10,000 opportunities to be aware and connected each day.

Now I've shared what I like to think of as a secret technique with you, I hope you have fun with it and associate it with the beautiful thing that is beginner's mind and beginner's heart, the theme that Nataly's story today invited us into.

So thank you Nataly, and, of course, thank you for listening. We hope you're safe and well.

We'd love to hear your personal reflections from this episodes. You can email us at [hello@meditativestory.com](mailto:hello@meditativestory.com). Or you can find us at any of your favorite social media platforms. Our handle is: @meditativestory.