

Meditative Story Transcript – Morgan Harper Nichols (Soul Curriculum)

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MORGAN HARPER NICHOLS: As a sophomore in high school, I sit at my home computer. The glow from the screen washes over me. A world map sits open in my browser window. I want to explore what lies outside my home state of Georgia. I'm looking for a new place to find community out from under the shadow of who I've been. I guide the mouse, guide my mind, guide my hope east.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Welcome to Soul Curriculum, a special episode of Meditative Story.

In this episode, we're inviting back Morgan Harper Nichols to revisit some of the powerful moments and themes from her transformative story. Hopefully, in listening, something special opens up for you too.

In her Meditative Story, Morgan travels abroad for the first time as a young university student and struggles to find her place in a new city. But it's when she's forced to confront the unknown, that she forges a sense of self and belonging.

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

GUNATILLAKE: Hi there, Morgan. So great to have you on the show back on the show, I guess.

NICHOLS: Yes. I'm so excited to be back. I really am.

GUNATILLAKE: And I understand that you are the busiest person in the world at the moment. I see that you've gotta ... Is it a book of poetry coming out next Spring?

NICHOLS: Yes. It just finished. Like just finished sending off those emails. Like, "Okay. This is the final, final, final, final, final, final version."

So yes, that's been keeping me very busy, but it also feels very good to say, "Okay. That was it. It's sent off."

GUNATILLAKE: Sure, and obviously you are a master of writing and putting imagery around that writing. But when you told us your story, that was obviously a very different medium through telling the story. Is that something you do typically, or was that a new experience for you when you recorded with us?

NICHOLS: It was very new to do that publicly. I am a passionate, lifelong diarist. A diary-ist? However you say that. I've been keeping a diary or a journal pretty much my entire life, and I'll even record myself sharing my own story, and I'll just leave it alone for like a year or two. So I will have moments where I'm like, I don't ever know when I'm gonna get to even share, you know, storytelling this way. So when

Meditative Story came, I was like, "Oh, here's that moment. Here's that moment where I actually get to take some of what I've just been kind of speaking through and working through privately, you know, into a more public space."

GUNATILLAKE: That's so cool to hear. I know that many of the team here are big into journaling and writing diaries and get so much out of it. And I'm so glad, for you and for us, that being part of the show meant you were able to share some of your more private reflections more publicly in a way that felt safe.

One of the themes of your story was very much around comfort zones. So if you are comfortable with listening back to excerpts of your story and sharing it again for a second time, that's what we're going to do. I've picked out some of the most intriguing parts. I'm really excited to explore the themes and ideas behind them with you. Should we go for it?

NICHOLS: Yes, absolutely.

GUNATILLAKE: For this first moment, I wanted to go back to an early time in your life when you would dive into the worlds of fantasy books, and maybe even escape some of the less pleasant aspects of the real world around you too. Let's listen.

NICHOLS: My world in Stone Mountain-Lithonia, Georgia is small. My town is mostly Black, like me. The grown-ups are kind. They welcome me. But I don't have many friends my own age growing up. I feel isolated. And at this point in my life, I've heard the word "autism." It'll be years before I understand how much it explains what I'm going through.

Late one afternoon, I sit on the church's carpeted green steps reading the fantasy epic *The Hobbit*. The sun filters through the trees, it provides the perfect reading light. Then one boy passes by me and looks down. He says, "You're so weird." It catches me off-guard how casually he says it. Like it's a fact. I hear other kids say "You're different. You're strange." Does everyone think I'm weird? Does everyone think I don't belong?

I look back down at my book. Reading it returns me to the world of Bilbo Baggins, a kid who loves his beautiful home, but is ready to venture out. He makes friends everywhere through the adventures they embark on together. I want to move through the world like this. I want to stop worrying about my differences. I want to belong.

GUNATILLAKE: Morgan, listening to you talk made me reflect on my own experiences. You know, my parents moved from Sri Lanka to London in the late sixties. And when we were really small and went back to Sri Lanka for holidays, it was really exciting. But then as a teenager, I became a lot more self-conscious about it.

And although they didn't mean to be hurtful, my cousins were effectively sort of talking to me as if it wasn't my place and that I didn't belong there as well. I then

projected that feeling when I was back in London as well. I totally felt like I was caught between two worlds. I'm really interested whether you recognize that feeling, of being caught in the negative spiral. And do you ever still find yourself in a vortex of questioning and doubting yourself?

NICHOLS: Yes, I do. I do. I actually remember feeling that way the most recently after I shared with my friends that I had been diagnosed with autism. Like, I don't know if irrational is the right word or whatever it was. For some naive reason, I just wanted one of my friends to say, "Ooh, me too. I think I'm autistic."

And that was strange because I think that was the first it happened. In a sense that, you know, that kid on the step saying you're weird, like that was a very clear negative othering. But for me, when I began to share about my diagnosis, that was like, you know, people were supportive, they were kind, empathetic, all the things that you want people to be when you're sharing something vulnerable. And then at the same time, but it's like, "Yeah, but I don't relate. Ugh."

So for me, it's like a question of what's my place in the world and constantly going back and forth between okay. I think I found it, and then something happens, and it's like, "Oh, okay. I've been othered again."

GUNATILLAKE: And what about since then? Have you found that connection when it's come to your autism?

NICHOLS: It was actually very, very recently, like a few weeks ago, that I got an email from a mutual connection of another adult who was diagnosed as an adult, like me. And we were able to kind of like have a longer email exchange, sharing more details, more personal experience. And that to me felt very authentic and real and felt like, "oh, that's what I was looking for."

So I'm hoping for more of that; it's still very new. But I think the difference is, and I think this has been a sign to me at least of, of hope and of growth in my own life is that, well, I am hopeful that those people are out there. I do feel that even if those personal connections haven't been made, I do feel that there's a possibility that they can be.

GUNATILLAKE: I hope that in hearing your episode people in our audience will want to connect more too. The actions you've taken in the story are very much built on strong foundations of you growing into knowing who you are and what you are about and your level of comfort with yourself. And I'm wondering whether you could say anything about how you see the relationship between being able to accept ourselves for who we are and the feeling of belonging.

NICHOLS: One of the reasons why I was so excited to share this story is because even though there have been other moments in my life where I feel like I've been on that journey, this particular story, there's so much movement in the story. I'm kind of naturally a low energy person. Like, I'm at home a lot. It takes me a minute to get up and get out and do things.

But just because of the way my life was arranged at that time, you know, I'm going from one country to another. I'm using a passport for the first time. I'm walking up and down the street in the country that I've never known or lived in. There's so much movement. And that's important to me because that memory of that movement even still kind of lives within my body.

And I think that's why I go back to that story in my memory, because I'm like, I tend to be so afraid and overthink like, oh, I'm not gonna be accepted. I'm not gonna be known. I'm not going to, I don't wanna open up too much because if I open up, then, you know, what, if people other me again. But I was like here, in this moment in my life, just by moving with the experience of living in a new place, going up and down the street, eating dinner with friends, I organically ended up finding that acceptance. So it just, that, that story to me has just remained so special, because it was like, wow, look at you just moving through the world, facing all these unknowns and yet still day by day, slowly, but surely you're finding your place. You're finding that acceptance.

GUNATILLAKE: Beautifully said, Morgan. Thank you.

Next we'll go to a moment of real challenge from your story. You arrive in Birmingham for university, and after the first month you need to visit a hair salon. But finding the right one turns out to be a pretty distressing ordeal.

NICHOLS: In my hometown a lot of people look like me. I can always find a Black salon, where someone knows what to do with my hair. Here, I'm worried.

I pass the hair salon on main street every day on my way to class. We schedule an appointment for that Friday. I step back out into the drizzle feeling relieved. But on the day of my appointment, the stylist I'm booked with looks up from her client's hair and says, "We can't do your hair."

"Oh," I say. "Why can't you do my hair?"

"Because it's curly," she says. For a moment, I think about the notion of a stylist who doesn't know how to do curly hair. It's absurd. So I keep trying.

"It's not unmanageable curls," I say. "I can show you how to comb it out." Now I'm offering her solutions.

"Here's what happens when it's wet; here's what to do next. When you wash it, you'll see." I've never had to explain myself this way before. She's decided she's not interested.

I stumble out into the cold and think: I don't know where to go from here. Walking slowly up the street I wonder, who can I ask for help? Not my roommates.

Even for all of the times back home where I may feel alone or different, I always have at least one grown-up, sometimes my mom, my dad, a professor, a friend, one road that I know will get me back on course. But at this moment, there are no roads. I feel so lonely.

GUNATILLAKE: Morgan, there's a lot happening here, and it's quite a complex moment. And you know, I can imagine the frustration you felt. I actually can more than imagine it. I basically buzz cut my own hair for 15 years, for not dissimilar reasons. So we leave you there at the salon. You're missing the support structures around you that you would've turned to in those kinds of moments. What did you end up doing next?

NICHOLS: You know, I remember having to go back to the drawing board and try to find a hair salon. And I think I remember just typing in a series of things, just trying to find a clue, because I was like, I don't want that again. Like, I don't wanna have to, like, go get on the train, and go catch a bus, and take a whole day. And then I walk in and have the same experience. So I think I ended up typing in, like, African hair salon. Because I was like, I just want to be sure. But I ended up finding my way there and just having the exact opposite experience. You know, which was: "you're welcome here." Like, "come on in, we can do your hair" — no issues, no issues.

GUNATILLAKE: And this kind of situation where people come across a space where they're made to feel they don't belong, I guess is one sort of gentle way of saying that.

And do you ever give advice or like how to deal with those kinds of issues today?

NICHOLS: Yes. Yes I do. And, it probably just comes from my own personality. And you know, how I am in the world is just to get unapologetic about internet searches and finding things. I even do that with doctor's appointments. You know, I will go through and read reviews. And if I find someone that looks like me in the review, I will read their review.

So for me, I find it helpful to say, I shouldn't have to do this, but I'm going to spend the extra time looking, asking around. So for me, a lot of it is practical in that sense, but also simultaneously, like don't shame yourself, and don't feel bad for having to do that. Like that's not your fault. I think that's what's most important to know is like, you're not too complicated for having to go this extra mile for having to do this extra thing. I think that's the thing it's like, yeah, look for it. You know, find the thing and also hold space for what you're feeling in that moment.

GUNATILLAKE: Yeah. And is it possible to use those moments as opportunities to reinforce our identity or find our voice? Or is it just too charged? There's too much happening emotionally.

NICHOLS: Yeah. I think it's probably just intuitive person to person. You know, it's like sometimes there are moments where you're just like, "no, I'm going to be a little extra vocal about this."

Like I'm going to, you know, say something, and sometimes it's like, okay, I'm gonna sit with this for a minute. So I think that's where, you know, kind of listening to your body and slowing down, it really comes in handy. Because I feel like I have, I have that equal experience.

Especially now knowing that I'm autistic, I have to manage that as well. There's sometimes where I'll notice something in the world, and I'm like, oh yeah, like this upsets me. I wanna see it change. And sometimes I have the capacity to go right into it right away. But sometimes it kind of takes a while, and I think that both are okay.

GUNATILLAKE: Yeah, I guess you do what you need to do at the moment, right?

NICHOLS: Yeah, exactly.

GUNATILLAKE: Alright, Morgan, let's move onto our final scene from your Meditative Story. This time, you face a moment that really questions your identity, and also tests it. Let's listen.

NICHOLS: As we sit to eat, out of nowhere one of the English guys probes, "Morgan, both you and John are Black, how come your skin color is lighter than his?" I don't really want to talk about it. But in that moment something happens. I feel the anger building up inside me. I don't want to back down.

"I'm a descendant of African enslaved people, brought to the plantations in the Americas where white slave owners had inappropriate relationships." I give as many details as I can. As the words spill out of my mouth I feel myself becoming a different person.

The Morgan who stood quiet on the church steps, who held back in the hair salon, who was made to feel like she didn't belong for being Black, autistic, a woman, no longer cares what you have to say about her.

The entire room goes quiet once I'm done. I glance at John, my friend from Nigeria, and he nods knowingly.

We sit down; we eat our food. I feel proud. Like I can sit more comfortably at the table.

Sitting in that room, I'm learning that being so far away makes me feel more like who I am. And with that new and stronger sense, the more I express myself, the more I feel like I belong, no matter where I go next.

GUNATILLAKE: So in this moment, you, again, force to confront the fact that you othered in a particular space. And I'm really interested in, in what you say near there at the end and how this was your first sort of real travel, you know, you had to get a passport, it was a big sort of change geographically for you. And what did you think

that the distance from your life in America played in giving you that strength to stand up yourself?

NICHOLS: It was a moment of clarification of who I was, because prior to going to England, I always saw myself as Black first. Being African American first. And then now that I have this passport, it's like, "Oh. In this moment, I'm an American first." And I mean, the only thing I feel in that moment is just, "Oh, this is new." You know, I don't tend to see myself in that way. And I think that that's why I just believe telling stories is so important because that's not every Black American's experience. It's just, you know, I was a kid who grew up in the town of Stone Mountain, Georgia, where the KKK decided to rebirth itself at the turn of the century. And I was a little kid who loved history and I'm like, oh, what's this about, what's this about? So, you know, I was very aware of that. I'm kind of in a different category of American. Then it became, "Okay. So yeah, I am an American, but then there's this other part of me, African American, American-African, African American."

I just, I hadn't spent tons of time having to think about all that. Just, you know, for lack of better words, back home it was just like more black and white to me. And then it was like now being in this new setting, I would just see myself in a new way and trying to find language for it in real time.

GUNATILLAKE: And just interested actually in this sort of this little dynamic, it hints to you and John and how it's a two person community in that interaction. But how to allow identity be understood and seen and given the full appropriate context that gives him a support structure. Did you feel that?

NICHOLS: Yeah, so growing up, I remember my parents telling me specifically my dad about what we often call the nod. And the nod is like, when you see another Black person in public, we kind of look at each other nod, like "I see you."

But what I find so fascinating, I never thought about it this way before, until you just ask that question is that it's often unspoken. There's no words really. It's a nonverbal thing that happens. But, you know, it was real, you know, it was an authentic moment, a real moment of connection, but you don't have to go up to each other and speak to each other for that moment to be as potent as it can be.

And I think that that was similar in a way, kind of like an international version of that I had with John who was like, okay, there's a lot about our experiences that are different, but in that moment, Like I know why you said that. I'm glad that you had space and, you know, kind of like a co-sign of like, I see you.

I see you. And then that's kind of it.

GUNATILLAKE: So, Morgan, I just wanted to close up by going back to your day job if that's ok. The way I understand it is that you use poetry, words, and art to help people feel seen and find reflective space in their lives. I'm interested in what is it about poetry that's so effective in your experience for helping other people be seen?

NICHOLS: Yes. Yes. So, you know, my autism diagnosis really brought a lot of clarity to me as to why I'm so drawn to poetry and making art and why I keep returning to it over and over and over again. And that is: I kind of think of a lot of things in space. Even words, when I'm getting ready to form a sentence, it kind of feels like grabbing from different places to put them in line to be able to speak.

But it feels like my brain is rearranging things to try to make sense of it. So I find a lot of comfort in making art because that's a space where that experience becomes beautiful. It can create a sense of, wow. There's room for you to be seen as you are. And I find a sense of belonging in that. So that's why I kind of returned to it again, and again on a personal level. But just the more I interact with people, I'm like, okay. I think there's a lot of people experiencing that. Like in one way or another, everyone's experiencing some level of uncertainty or chaos. And I just want to show like, okay, well here's a way where all these things we're trying to make sense of, we can hold space for them, and we can breathe and miss it. And I think that art is just one way that we can do that.

GUNATILLAKE: Beautifully said, thank you, Morgan. And thank you so much for being on the show. I really look forward to following your creativity and your work. It's a gift of the world. Thank you so much.

NICHOLS: Thank you. Thank you. I've really enjoyed being able to have this conversation today.

GUNATILLAKE: With that, I'm going to sign off. I hope you enjoyed this episode. We'd love for you to share your thoughts about the episode. You can find us on all your social media platforms via our handle @MeditativeStory. Or you can email us at hello@meditativestory.com.

Thank you so much for listening.