

## **Meditative Story Transcript – Lex Gillette (Soul Curriculum)**

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**ROHAN GUNATILLAKE:** This is Soul Curriculum, where we reconnect with your favorite Meditative Story storytellers to take a deeper look at the wisdom they shared. In this show we explore takeaways which you can apply to your own life. Soul Curriculum is brought to you by WaitWhat. I'm your host, Rohan.

In his recent Meditative Story, Word Champion long jumper and reigning world record-holder, Lex Gillette rediscovers a long time passion for music and finds himself writing a song on his way to the London 2012 Olympics. He challenges the expectations set on him as a blind man who still has an essential part of him yearning to be shared with the world off the track. That's the theme we'll explore today with Lex. Listen with us.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Hi there Lex. How are you doing?

**LEX GILLETTE:** I'm doing good. How are you?

**GUNATILLAKE:** I'm great actually. You know, I was learning more and reading more about you and your background earlier, and I was blown away just how long your career's been as an athlete. Are you just training all the time?

**GILLETTE:** It probably seems that way, but I do typically get a break around September, October-ish. But from November until August, we are usually out there training and competing.

**GUNATILLAKE:** So you are in your little holiday zone?

**GILLETTE:** Oh yeah. I'm enjoying it right now. Eating everything, Just consuming everything. So yeah, it's a lot of fun.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Now Lex, when I listened to your story, I got a real sense that you've gone through a lot of growth over your life and through your athletic career. So I was really interested if you could go back and talk to your younger self, you know, in this moment and share some of the wisdom that you have now about being seen, about being recognized on your own terms, what would you tell him?

**GILLETTE:** I would tell him that he should never stop building the world that he can see, just because no one views it similarly. And I say that because I talk a lot about vision and I have a mantra. "No need for sight when you have a vision." At the end of the day it's not our eyes that determine success. It's our ability to see that vision and to do everything in our power to bring that into fruition. You're gonna have resistance. You're gonna have pushback. You're gonna have people who don't believe that you can do whatever it is that you're attempting to do. It just means that this is an opportunity for you to make a decision to keep moving forward. As long as you stay devoted and committed to what it is that you believe in. Sooner or later, everyone who was once blind to what you were seeing, they'll be able to see it as well.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Lovely. So without any further ado we'll move into the first moment from your story. And in this first moment we meet you as a child. You slowly lose your sight, and amid a love for music it's sport, and long jump, that starts a whole new direction for you.

**GILLETTE:** Each morning I wake up, my world gradually grows dimmer. It's disappointing. Frightening. Socially, I feel my world shrinking. I worry that because of my blindness I will be overlooked by my friends, unseen by my community and by the rest of the world. I'm still surrounded by the objects from my old life. My video game console. The electric keyboard I got for Christmas. I sit in our living room and run my hands over the keys. The sound of the notes ascending feels comforting.

One evening, a member of our congregation visits. She says, "Stevie Wonder plays the piano. Ray Charles plays the piano. Oh yeah Lex, you could play the piano too." I hear the same thing on repeat from friends and neighbors. I can't see, but I don't need them to plan my future for me. Playing music would mean I'm out there in front of people. I'm afraid of being overlooked, but I don't want to bring attention to myself.

So once I lose my sight, instead of practicing music, I do what no one expects me to do. I run.

In high school, I love track and field. I travel from North Carolina all the way to Michigan for a sports camp for kids with visual impairments. Coach Whitmer convinces me to try the long jump. I'm not sure at first. I'm totally blind and propelling myself through the air. There's a runway — 114 feet. I hear a verbal cue from my guide. I know the number of steps I take before leaping from the takeoff board. I leap fearlessly as far as I can into the sand pit. The pit doesn't care where I'm from. It doesn't care what color I am, or my beliefs, or my disability. It just wants me to fly.

My giant leaps through the air define the next years of my life. I do it for the rest of high school, then college. The track becomes a place of comfort for me. I drop into this zone where I know what I'm here to do, and how to do it. I'm not fulfilling other people's expectations. I'm learning to create my own.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Lex, I love how you talk about the qualities of the sandpit. How accepting it is of you. And when I was reflecting on you starting out in the long jump it made me think, it must take a lot of courage to leap without knowing where you're going to land, especially in the early days. What was it like in the beginning for you?

**GILLETTE:** Yeah, I think that in the beginning it was definitely hard because I was participating in something totally new. I had never seen anyone participate in the long jump before, and I had very vague memories of seeing people compete in track and field as a whole. So to have someone at my school who was encouraging me to

sprint as fast as I could without being able to see, and at the right point taking off and trusting that there would be sand waiting for me when I landed, it was definitely scary. And then I also thought about the outsiders and what they might think and what they might say by seeing me do this. You know, people can encourage you and they can also tear you down and they can question and, and judge, and all of these things.

**GUNATILLAKE:** But you did it anyway.

**GILLETTE:** Yeah. I had someone there who believed in me long before I was able to believe in myself. And oh man, he just, Coach Whitmer, he had a different mind. And so you hang around people with that type of power long enough, you start to absorb that same power, and the same belief, and that same view beyond the horizon of what's possible.

**GUNATILLAKE:** And alongside sport, music is a big part of your story and your life in general. And what did it feel like to let go of that interest and focus so much on sport and did it feel like a loss?

**GILLETTE:** Yes. Growing up, I had my keyboard from Christmas when I was young and listened to music on the radio and. I had the CDs and the boom boxes and things like that. I mean, it's part of the culture, but when you say that, "Oh, I can sing a song," that was a little fearful for me because I never really wanted to be put on the spot like that. And I also knew that I had this athletic gift or these abilities, because my mom's side of the family, they're the athletic ones.

They all played everything from, you know, baseball, softball, basketball, football. And so I steered more toward that. But I do think that internally there definitely was this struggle, if you will, of man, I have this other gift as well, but really don't want to disclose it because of being front and center, being in front of people and what other people thought of me and what they would say from seeing me participate.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Yes, that must have been challenging. Peoples opinion and expectations of you is a core theme of your Meditative Story. Are there times today when you still feel limited by other people's expectations?

**GILLETTE:** I definitely feel a lot more free. There certainly are times as a person with a disability where you still experience some sort of limiting beliefs, but over the years it's gotten to the point where I just believe that if you continue to live life concerned about what other people believe you can do and and who they believe you are, it's gonna be hard for you to really make some huge leaps and bounds because I would say that the average person probably would look at someone in my situation and think, I wonder how he lives his life, or he must feel alone, and how does he do this? How does he do that? And so I was always around people growing up who really poured into me and told me that, "You know what? It don't really matter if you're blind. It just matters that you believe that you can go out into the world and, you know, you dictate the narrative."

**GUNATILLAKE:** Beautifully put. Thank you, Lex. I think we all need more sandpits in our lives. People, places, communities, which accept us however we are. Now to our second scene from your story, you've actually begun to rekindle that passion for music in your daily life, and you decide how important that will be for you moving forward.

**GILLETTE:** I like to play before and after training. Music and sports let me fly in different ways. Where once I wanted to hide from people who might be looking at me or judging me, now I see how music helps me communicate who I am and how I feel in new ways. As a blind person, I still struggle with the constant reminders of feeling isolated, of feeling overlooked.

My entire social circle are my teammates, some of whom I share this suite with. One evening they're going to a club downtown. Everyone's getting ready. I can smell their cologne. I hear closet doors slamming, and different shoes being put on the ground. Questions fly from one room to the other. "Should I wear the Chelsea boots or the Jordans?" "The blue or the black?" Sometimes someone says, "Oh, what's going on, Lex? How you doin, bro?" But no one asks me to join them.

I get it. No one wants to babysit the blind guy. But I bookmark this moment and countless others like it. My challenge is to come up with other ways to be seen, to connect with people. Sitting here I tell myself, "You need to stick with singing and songwriting, because this is going to be your way to communicate with the rest of the world."

**GUNATILLAKE:** Earlier in your Meditative Story you talk about how when you're performing music yourself, singing and playing, you felt it was maybe a bit too vulnerable for you. It seems that through the story, as you talk about your music, your perspective on performing changes. I'm just really interested in what that transformation sort of revealed for you. As an athlete, people are spectating you all the time, but is it different when you are singing?

**GILLETTE:** That's a good question. At least from an athletic context. You know, I'm training Monday through Friday. That's for the majority of the year. And when you practice something long enough, you start to build that confidence and that comfort. And so similar to sport, music is that same way. And you know, with all things that we do, you know, you just have to keep working at it. And as you continue to do that it becomes something that it just kind of comes naturally to you.

**GUNATILLAKE:** And does your music allow you to communicate something that's different to what you're able to communicate when you're jumping?

**GILLETTE:** Yeah. I think that when I'm out there on the field of play, it's. We're looking at athletes who are exceptional when it comes to sport. You see the resilience, you see the grit and the grind. You see that, you know, over the past couple years it's been tough for the entire world, but you see the perseverance of all of the athletes in the world put on display within the Olympics and Paralympics.

You think about music for sure. We can talk about those same topics, but I think that you can definitely get a lot more personal and you can talk about relationships in life and you know how you felt at this moment in time. So I think that you're definitely able to cover a wide range of events in life and the emotions attached to those events.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Lovely. Thank you Lex. I do think there is so much value in having different ways in which we're able to express ourselves, ways in which to express different parts of ourselves.

In our third and final moment from your story, we're in London for the 2012 Paralympics, but on the way there, you do something incredibly generous. You use your music to raise funds for your guide's mother so she can see you both perform together for the very first time.

**GILLETTE:** We're on the cusp of one of the largest spectacles on the planet: the London Paralympic Games.

The ground is carpeted beneath our feet, and it starts to incline as we reach the mouth of the stadium. Then — BOOM — I feel the space open up. Electricity hums in the air. I feel the warmth of the lights, and the cheers of 85,000 people. It's so loud I can't even hear Wesley beside me.

But then, as we march around the stadium, something unexpected happens. I hear Wesley shout. Somehow in this huge, sold-out crowd, Wesley sees his mom.

After our events, I meet her inside the Athlete's Village. She wraps her arms around me. She's proud of her son, and I'm proud too. My song helped create this moment.

When I compete, it's about more than just, "I can run fast and jump far." That's only half the story. The other half is how I got there, defying the gravity of people's expectations. We can all use our best gifts to find ways to be seen and to be heard. When I run and jump, I'm speaking to the world with my body, telling them that I refuse to be held down.

Now, singing allows me to create my own spotlight, one that I step into fully, with my whole being. I don't have to forge an identity through the way the world sees me.

I'm not Stevie Wonder. I'm not Ray Charles. I'm unapologetically me, Lex Gillette.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Now, Lex, when you made that song and you used it to raise money, which made it possible for Wesley's mother to come over to London for the Paralympic games, what did it feel like to do that and give that gift to your, to your friend, your colleague?

**GILLETTE:** I think I look at it more as, you know, an attempt to repay to him what he's given to me over the years. And to come to the realization that his mother had never seen us compete in person. I was like, "Man." It was just something I never really thought about, but I told myself, "We gotta make this happen." And that was where my mind had went first. "Let's write the song. Let's put it up, let's sell it. We can literally raise as much money as possible to get her there."

You know, although it was a very fun process, it's something that I look back on now and it brings a smile to my face. But, again, I think to work with someone who essentially puts their life on hold to help another person excel in sport and in life, I just view it as this is just what he and his mom, this is just what they deserve. Let's make it happen.

**GUNATILLAKE:** And in this closing section, I get the strong sense that you are so clear about being unapologetically you. I'm curious, how do you relate to labels nowadays? Is that something that you've moved on from?

**GILLETTE:** Yeah, I would say that I've definitely moved on, and the reason being is because I think that when we think of ourselves as one thing you can sometimes cloud your mind as it relates to other aspects of your life where you can be successful, or other gifts that you might possess. And when I first started as an athlete, that's what I saw myself as. "Oh, I'm gonna go down to the track and I'm gonna warm up. I'm gonna do the butt kicks, the high knees. I'm gonna do all of the drills. I'm gonna get on the long jump runway. I'm gonna run then repeat the 150 meter sprint, da da da da da." All of those things, certainly true. I have to do that in order to be the best athlete that I can be. But along the journey, understand that there are different angles to you. There are other dimensions to you, and I don't think that those things should be totally silenced or hushed. So I've kind of just shed those labels. And, you know, I'm considered blind. I don't even really think about that anymore. I'm just navigating around a huge neighborhood and making the turns that I know that are there.

**GUNATILLAKE:** And coming back to this theme of expectations, it's clearly been important to you to defy people's expectations. But I'm interested in whether you still set expectations for yourself.

**GILLETTE:** Yeah. Oh yeah. Always. Always. Every single time that I compete. Just because I might have won World Championships in 2019, it doesn't guarantee that I'm going to win in 2021 or whatever the next one is. I still have to train hard and make sure that I'm in the best shape possible so that the next one I'll be in the best position to win.

So yeah, I definitely still have expectations. I set goals. I have these things in place so that I can stay hungry. Every time you see me within the space of competition, you can expect that I'm going to bring my absolute best because that's just how it has to be.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Well thank you, Lex, for sharing your story and joining us today on the show.

**GILLETTE:** Oh yeah, Rohan. No, I appreciate it.

**GUNATILLAKE:** There's so much to love about Lex, the long and storied career, the wisdom he's accumulated over the years. But the thing that most struck me in talking to him was what he was like as a kid. Having only recently lost his sight, his response to those around him was to run around his neighborhood — at full pelt as we might say here in Scotland. He'd lost his vision, the sense that most people consider to be the most valuable in navigating the world, and instead of slowing things down, he turned life up to 11.

It made me wonder what the equivalent of running blind around the neighborhood is for me, beyond of course doing it literally, which for obvious reasons I am not recommending you do! I think it's about doing something risky where elation and adrenalin gets you through. You're out of your comfort zone but you're flying. I'm still working out what that is for me, but once I do I'm going to give it a go, and I will let you all know.

How about you do the same? I'd love to hear what you come up with.

We'd love to hear your personal reflections on this conversation. You can find us on all your social media platforms through our handle @meditativestory, or you can email us at: [hello@meditativestory.com](mailto:hello@meditativestory.com)

And be sure to check out the video lex posted on his TikTok channel about us. We appreciate you Lex!

Thanks for listening.