

Meditative Story Transcript – Florence Williams (Soul Curriculum)

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: This is Soul Curriculum, the companion show to Meditative Story where we reconnect with our storytellers in a deeper conversation revealing the inner wisdom they shared. In this show together, we replay moments of reflection and transformations, which you can apply to your own life.

Loss and grief affects all of our lives at some point, and though these times are often deeply painful, might they also be transformative? It's a question that comes up again and again in Florence Williams' book *Heartbreak*, as she reconciles the loss in her life. In her Meditative Story, which we'll revisit today, she explores memories of visiting Tulsa, Oklahoma to care for her dying mother-in-law while processing her divorce to her son. Through the loving conversations of this relationship, Florence gains the insight and tools that help her recover from a broken heart. Let's listen.

GUNATILLAKE: Florence, hi. Great to have you on the show. How are you doing?

FLORENCE WILLIAMS: Hi, Rohan. It's so great to be here. I'm doing well, and really happy to be talking to you today.

GUNATILLAKE: Your book *Heartbreak* came out earlier this year. Are you still enjoying the afterglow of its publication?

WILLIAMS: It's actually been really great. There are so many people who've been emailing me just to say thank you. "I understand now what happened to me, what happened to my body" — that's been really rewarding. It's been fun.

GUNATILLAKE: So cool that you were able to use some of the audio journals that you'd recorded when you were putting together the audiobook, too.

WILLIAMS: Sure, Yeah. During the reporting of the book I did often record my feelings and what was happening into my recorder, and I also recorded a lot of my friends. I recorded my therapist; I recorded scientists, boyfriends, you name it. And so we were able to layer those interviews into the audiobook, which was really a fun project.

GUNATILLAKE: In your Meditative Story you were caring for Penny, your dying former mother-in-law, while — at the same time — processing the end of your marriage to her son. We'll first hear the scene from your episode when you left Penny to rest inside the house, and you stepped outside for a walk.

WILLIAMS: When she sleeps, I walk around the neighborhood. Everything in Oklahoma is wide and flat, including the streets around Penny's retirement community. I'm drawn to a field bounded by Joe Creek, which flows into the river a few blocks away. I can hear birds and crickets. I breathe into the pale sky.

One afternoon, I forget the key card to let me back in through the development's gate. I wonder if I can squeeze through the wrought iron post on one side. I can. It makes me feel insubstantial. Like I'm barely here. I've lost my center of gravity. For so long, I was grounded by the pull of two people in a marriage. On my own, I don't feel like there's enough of me to keep me from floating into space.

Thanksgiving, five months earlier, I help our two teenagers pack for the holiday. We scour the closets for suitcases with working zippers. "Found one!" They'll be driving with their dad to his father's farm where they always go. Only this time, I won't be with them. And the thought makes my stomach hurt. "Bike helmets, check! Reading materials, raincoats, mud boots, check." I know exactly what the mud on this farm is like, how it sucks up car tires and small feet. I know all the activities: looking for snakes in the swamp, riding tractors, dressing for the big meal, eating piles of carbohydrates, and then posing for the yearly extended family portrait. Sitting knee to knee, stocking, stocking, generation to generation on the brick porch steps — there's a performative and predictable, yet comforting quality. Just like a long marriage.

GUNATILLAKE: That's so beautifully-described Florence, I really got a sense from this how the absence of those little routines of family life amplified your sense of loss. When we experience a great loss like this, some might say it actually opens room for something new in our lives as well. Did you feel that at the time?

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. I felt it almost right away because there's this huge abyss, 25 years together, really my entire adult life. The future is gone. And I think that's why I felt tremendous anxieties. Who am I without this relationship and without this family unit? The opening was a surprise to me. I thought it would just be loss. But instead, there's this curiosity about how I move through the world now. What do I wanna be? And in fact, that's a tremendous opportunity. It's a tremendous privilege to be able to ask that of ourselves because we don't always get the chance to do that.

GUNATILLAKE: Our minds so often have a powerful gravity towards the negative during times like these. I remember when my own father died, and he was really quite ill in his last few years, and that was what dominated my memory at the time, the hard stuff. Florence, at times like this, how can we stay more open to the new found curiosity that you describe?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think that's such a great and important question. When you're in a state of fight or flight, it's very hard to get into a place of curiosity. There's something about keying into your senses, and for me, that really happens easily outside, you know, what birds am I hearing? I describe that in the piece. What does the sunlight feel like? It quiets down for just a moment the sort of negative cycling of, you know, anxiety. I think it lets some space in. Penny was very inspiring for me in the way that she always had this compass point toward beauty in her life.

GUNATILLAKE: All the best stuff happens outside.

WILLIAMS: The best stuff happens outside. Yeah. One of the many inspirations she left me with.

GUNATILLAKE: Sure. And you said at the time that it felt like you'd lost your center of gravity, and what did it take for you to regain that solidity and stability?

WILLIAMS: It's ongoing. It's not like you figure out who you are, and it's one and done. For me, I tend to come back to myself often in moments of stillness, when I'm alone, feeling my senses, feeling my body. It's so grounding, and if you do that enough, it does help me feel a sense of I am my own center of gravity, and I am my own home. It's impossible to be in that state when you're feeling freaked out about your future. And so, the wonderful benefit about getting into that space is you realize, oh, maybe I'm not so freaked out. This moment is safe; this moment is fine. And these moments can string together. It's a nice feeling when it happens.

GUNATILLAKE: It certainly is, and a feeling we can all strive to find, maybe. Another moment you recounted in your Meditative Story was sitting with Penny to record memories from her life. Her memories of her divorce left you with questions about how to move on from your own. Let's listen.

WILLIAMS: Penny winks at me and leans over. She knows exactly what I'm missing today. "I'm so glad you're here," she chuckles. "We can be exiles together." We recover from the big meal sprawled on her king bed. We recline against the bright red pillows. And she dozes.

We have a project for the weekend. She wants to tell me her stories and secrets. I will record them. I'm the family documentarian. Her energy kicks in around 9:00 PM. She's always been a night owl. I supply her with a large glass of apple juice, and then I press the round red button on my digital recorder.

"Did you ever feel lonely after your divorce?" She says, "I had friends and big ideas." I digest that.

"Did you have to learn how to find comfort and happiness on your own?" She looks at me. Her lips pursed in thought and understanding. "I eased into it. It'll take a while. Holidays are hard." She says, "Sometimes I still get choked up thinking about my ex-husband. I guess I always will, and you will feel this way too." But she tells me she also loves having her own space and spontaneously jumping in her car to drive across the prairie to visit children or friends. Penny is a chaser of sunsets and horizons. Sometimes while she drives, she holds a disposable camera with one hand to snap pictures of captivating clouds out her window. Beauty to her is a powerful antidote to loneliness.

Even from her bed, I see this captured beauty all around. I see it in the potted plants, budding outside her window. I see it in the perfect circles of lemon she

drops in our water glasses, and the paintings, and textured rugs all around us. Her bed with the two of us in it feels like a life raft.

GUNATILLAKE: I love this visual of Penny's bed being a raft for you, keeping you from the unpredictable ocean currents you were facing at the time. You clearly had a special relationship with her, but even given that, did it surprise you that she was there to offer support when you were divorcing her son?

WILLIAMS: I think we always had the kind of relationship where I knew that she was there for me. She came to help me when my two babies were born. So I wasn't surprised she was there for me. But, one of the gifts really of heartbreak is that it made me more vulnerable, more emotional, more apt to reach out with these very personal questions. So I could say, "I am confused. I don't know what to do. How does this work? Please help me." And, you know, she actually had these incredibly wise answers, but she also just had the example of who she is.

GUNATILLAKE: Florence, in writing your book and going through this experience, you've become something of an expert in heartbreak and being vulnerable. Given the benefit of this hard-earned wisdom, is there any advice you would give to the younger Florence of that time?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, absolutely. You know when Penny responded to that question, when I asked her, how did you deal with the loneliness? When she said, "Oh, well I had friends and big ideas," at the time I was a little bit skeptical. I thought, well, that's a consolation prize, big ideas. Okay, fine. But what Penny had as she had a sense of purpose. She wanted to make the world a better place. She did that through her job. She did it through her life as a mother and a grandmother. She wanted to help people. And now I understand actually having that sense of purpose is really a fantastic antidote to loneliness.

GUNATILLAKE: And I suppose it really helps to hear from someone who has been through exactly the same type of challenge you were facing?

WILLIAMS: It just deepens your relationships. It deepens your connections. Being willing to admit that I had really difficult emotions, that was new for me. And, you know, when you're vulnerable with someone, they're vulnerable back. And I think that's actually another one of those unexpected gifts of this difficult process.

GUNATILLAKE: We've heard how Penny turned to natural beauty as an antidote to her loneliness, snapping photos of the clouds and sunsets. I get the sense that you find a similar feeling of solace in these things. Is that fair to say?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, and I discovered this as I was writing my book about the science of heartbreak, that there is actually quite a bit of evidence showing that when we can open ourselves to beauty, as Penny did, just so intuitively, that can really help us deal with challenges in the world. And it's weird that that happens. We don't really talk about the pursuit of beauty as being a marker of resilience. I felt like that was a really important message to convey, that we can actually train ourselves to be more that

way and then in turn to become more resilient. Sit there. Breathe. Just take it in. It could be a houseplant, it could be a sunset that you see out the window or on a walk, and just be with that point of beauty. If you do it a couple of times a day, you slowly actually train your brain to be more open to beauty. I think it's definitely worth trying.

GUNATILLAKE: Amen to that. And this tool may well have been useful for the moment you recounted toward the end of your Meditative Story, when you witnessed Penny going through something you greatly feared.

WILLIAMS: I'm still afraid of so much. One of the things I fear most is aging alone. Being ill alone. Dying alone. But when I see Penny's frail body in that chair, I see she is prepared to unveil this for me as she has unveiled so much.

"You'll find a fabulous man," she replies. "Maybe a hillbilly," and we both laugh as I clear the tray. "It's important to have a great love," she murmurs to me later in the evening, and that is her final advice to me. I know she doesn't mean the hillbilly. Although that's part of it. But, love is bigger than marriage and bigger than romance. The love that wards off loneliness is not the love you receive, but the love you give.

Even in her weakened state, Penny is connected by filaments of love to something larger, filaments fortified by decades of recklessly overflowing pots of oxtail soup. Penny's love is so big, it fills that whole room and that whole house and that whole creekside side in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Home has always been where the people I love are. But over these months, Penny has been showing me another definition of home. It's about finding my own gravity.

"Know your center," she has said to me more than once. "And be from it. That's who you are. Come back to it when you feel troubled or in doubt."

Her final gift to me is to preside over my hour of need. My final gift to her is to let her, and then, to let her go. Dying is hard work. I don't wanna make it harder. She needs to know it's okay to withdraw. I bring new flowers into her room and arrange them in small vases surrounding her. Soon her sons fly in. A few days later, she is gone.

In teaching me how to die, she's showing me how to live bravely with concern for others, with beauty, with love. And with that, I finally hear her message. I am going to be okay.

"Know your center, the center of your being, and be from it. Be able to come back to it in the quietest of times so when you do feel troubled or in doubt, you have a home to go to, and it's right there withinside yourself."

GUNATILLAKE: There's no real topping that is there Florence, just pure wisdom from zen master Penny.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. It's so powerful for me to hear her voice. She's always with me in some way.

GUNATILLAKE: And in that passage we get a sense of how Penny's perspective toward love changed — less about receiving romantic love and more about giving love more generally. Did her outlook about that influence you?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think about it a lot. There are certainly wonderful benefits to having romantic love in your life. I'm not gonna knock it, but there are a lot of ways to love, and there are a lot of ways to be loved. Penny lived the last, I guess, 50 years of her life really on her own. She had so much energy and so much compassion. I grew up in New York City. You know, that wasn't the cultural message that I grew up with. You were supposed to kind of achieve and put yourself first and be ambitious. And I think just witnessing that kind of profound generosity for me was life changing.

GUNATILLAKE: Amazing. Penny's last message that we heard was of the importance of knowing your own center. When I seek my own center, I try and look for the present feeling, rather than chasing something from the past, because we change so much from year-to-year, week-to-week. Is that something you recognize as well?

WILLIAMS: I like that; that speaks to me. One of the experiences of heartbreak is that you realize that life changes. You become, I think, more comfortable with uncertainty. The center's gonna change, and that's how we grow. It's okay.

GUNATILLAKE: You talk about how it took a while for the message that it's "going to be okay" to land with you. For anyone who's listening who might be experiencing troubling times, what could you say to help it land for them?

WILLIAMS: One of the most important messages I can convey is how important it is just to be patient. There's no place after grief that is completely back to your old self. Accept these scars in your heart, as part of who you are now. And to also recognize the gifts that they provide. You know, the ways that they help your heart open, but it's very hard to go looking for it. Instead, I think you need to just be patient and let it find you.

GUNATILLAKE: Thanks so much for sharing your story with us Florence and for giving us time with Penny once again.

WILLIAMS: Thank you so much for this conversation, Rohan.

GUNATILLAKE: I loved how Florence gave me a chance to reflect on the wisdom she'd learnt in writing her book and by speaking to her mother-in-law. How even when traumatic events like divorce or death create great loss in our life, it can also create space, space for new experiences and new versions of ourselves to grow. And that the scars to our hearts are not marks that detract, but new ways for our heart to expand and open.

Both Florence and Penny found resilience from heartbreak by chasing natural beauty, taking a moment to watch a sunset, to admire clouds sweeping across the sky or a rain break a puddle. Maybe, before we meet again, you could try doing the same. As Florence says: just sit there, breathe, and take in the beauty. Even doing this a couple of times a day is said to help your brain become more open to beauty and more resilient for the future.

That's all for today's episode. I hope you've enjoyed what you've heard. We'd love to hear from you. You can find us on all of your social media platforms via our handle @meditative story, or you can email us at hello@meditativestory.com. Take care now.