

Meditative Story Transcript – Alex Morris, 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.

Who doesn't know what it feels like to struggle with something, to resist asking for help, because admitting that level of vulnerability is scary? It takes real guts to admit that actually, everything is not okay, and that sometimes, what we really need is a helping hand. It's this struggle, to be open about his own needs, that Alex Morris recounts in his Meditative Story. Alex had been hiding the limitations of his eye sight for most of his life, not wanting others to know that his poor vision and night blindness meant he couldn't always do the same things as his peers. But when Alex finds the courage to voice his need for support, he widens his world in the process. Let's listen.

GUNATILLAKE: Hi Alex. How are you? Great to have you on Soul Curriculum.

ALEX MORRIS: Thank you so much for having me, Rohan. This is so fun.

GUNATILLAKE: In your Meditative Story episode, you told us about how it took a long time for you to be open with others about your eyesight. What's it been like to be fully out there with your story now?

MORRIS: It has only honestly reinforced the principle that people will surprise you with their empathy and their warmth when you let them in. I have completely found that with the episode being released.

GUNATILLAKE: It's great to hear that's been the case. And based on what you've learnt, if you could pass any wisdom to your younger self, what would that be?

MORRIS: I think honestly, I think I would've wanted to reassure him that asking for help doesn't make you weak. If anything, it takes so much more confidence to ask for help. I could've saved so much time and probably could've learnt Mandarin if I could've just had any of that time back.

GUNATILLAKE: Sure. Your Meditative Story explores what it's meant for you to live with what you used to call "bad eyes" and night blindness, and your struggle to prove to others that you were not in need of help. As we'll hear now, it's ultimately a losing battle that becomes all the harder when you learn of a long-kept secret from your parents. Let's listen.

MORRIS: I'm home for the summer after graduation. My parents ask to talk to me in the kitchen. They've made a pot of tea. Something serious is happening.

They tell me there is a name for what's been going on with my eyes. It's called retinitis pigmentosa or RP, and I was actually diagnosed when I was six.

"Alexander, they said you would be fully blind by the time you were 12, but that didn't happen," my dad says. I have a form of RP that causes my eyes to deteriorate more slowly. I'll likely be fully blind by my forties. The news hits me hard.

"Fully blind in my forties?" I've spent so long trying to hide this from people pretending nothing is wrong, but I won't be able to hide that. My parents explain in more detail. My tea goes cold.

I could resent them from keeping this from me, but I look at the love and concern in their faces. I don't hold anything against them. They wanted to give me this time just to be a kid. And looking back, I can see how much they protected me, always handled me with care. I've been wrapped in bubble wrap for 20 years, and I internalized that. Even now as an adult, I bubble wrap myself. I avoid going to certain places. I isolate myself because that's how I can stay safe.

GUNATILLAKE: This tough and unexpected conversation with your parents confronted you with the reality that your condition was becoming harder to hide. Now that you had this formal diagnosis, a name for it, did having this new label change your thinking in regards to asking for help?

MORRIS: It definitely helped having a name for it because I was still using terminology that my parents were telling me when I was five years old, where I was still saying, "yeah, I have this spelling mistake in my eye."

That was how they wanted to articulate it to me when I was a kid, rather than saying, "there's a gene issue in your retina." And so I think it really helped having something that felt more formal. But I don't know how much I really wanted to wrestle with it or consider it. And I think I was completely numb to it and I didn't really wanna talk about it for a long time.

GUNATILLAKE: You interpreted the decision of your parents not telling you sooner as "wanting to give you time to just be a kid." What would you say to anyone who might be struggling to understand such a choice or action?

MORRIS: I find it insane that my parents had to have 15 years of knowing this and constantly watching me and trying to notice differences in my eyesight. And I just think it's so crazy to think that we were just on two different worlds. It's taught me that there

are things that can be kinder to someone in a long term sense than sharing that short-term honesty. I just would've done the exact same thing in my parent's shoes, now that I think about it.

GUNATILLAKE: Despite the knowledge that you have from your parents about your condition, my sense is the muscle memory from a lifetime of convincing others you don't need help is hard to break. As we hear in this next moment from your story where, despite the potential danger you were in, you felt unable to reach out to those around you.

MORRIS: One summer night, a group of us head to a bar in town. I'm standing towards the back of the group. Everyone heads inside, but the bouncer puts out his hand to block my entry.

"You can't come in here wearing shorts, mate."

"No shorts? This isn't even a nice place," I argue. He doesn't budge.

My friends disappear upstairs. They forget I'm back here. My phone is dead. What am I gonna do? I begin the trek home. I creep along the sides of buildings, run my hands along the brick facades. I stand at a crosswalk for ages, listening for bikes and cars. It's stressful, dangerous. A truck can hit me at any moment. I'd never see it coming.

I hear a group of lads having a night out approach. I stop, take out my phone, and pretend to be looking at something intently. I hope they don't notice how panicked I am. I've done this since childhood. I do an impression of someone having a good time. The thought of asking anyone for help never occurs to me. They pass me by without a second thought, and I'm left alone again, standing in the dark.

GUNATILLAKE: You talked before about vulnerability, being vulnerable, what do you think is at the heart of that fear you might open yourself up to?

MORRIS: I think the fear of opening up was always solely about being a burden, even though I know I can just put my hand on somebody's shoulder, and they can help me through the bar or the pub. I just didn't want to be anyone's baggage for the night. If I was starting a relationship or a friendship, I was thinking, "I wanna go as long as possible, not telling you about my eyes, because I want as long as possible that you don't see me as baggage." That fear has been dispelled again and again, yet it's crazy how strong it held. I think that was what drove me so often to not say anything.

GUNATILLAKE: And eventually, Alex, obviously you pushed through that fear. What helped you do that?

MORRIS: The longer your relationships with people, the more you see where you can then help them in return in other ways. It doesn't have to be a one-way relationship of: now that we are friends, you're just my carer'. There are a thousand other ways that I can help you in the way that you help me that aren't about leading you places. That's what gave me the long-term confidence that people in my life that I love are gonna stick with me.

GUNATILLAKE: That's such an important insight, thank you Alex. In another moment from your Meditative Story, it's personal frustration, isn't it, that provides the catalyst for changing your attitude towards reaching out for support. Let's listen.

MORRIS: I'm standing at a bus stop in Los Angeles. The bus isn't coming. I've learned this is common. It's a driving city, but because of my eyes, I can't drive.

Across the street, I see a white van come to a stop. In big letters on the side, it says Dial a Ride. The van door opens and an elderly woman with a walker slowly exits with a wave to the driver. I find myself feeling jealous. That's the kind of service I want and need. That night I searched Dial a Ride online. It's a service operated by the city to provide transportations for the elderly and the disabled, and I catch myself: If I do this, if I apply for this service, it'll be the first time I identify as disabled. The first time I stop pretending, the first time I proactively ask for help.

Standing by the front window of our apartment, I see the Dial a Ride van pull up. To the curb is bigger than I remember, and now I see the word senior and disabled and blazed on the side. Not exactly subtle. The van driver nods and smiles. She doesn't ask me about my eyes. She's not here to judge. She's just here to help. Inside the van, I'm the youngest passenger by about 50 years. I'm also the least confident. My eldest seatmates don't hesitate to ask for help. They ask the driver to slow down, to give them directions, to help them out of the van, anything. They know their limitations, but they still have things they want to do.

They're part of a community, a network of people that are there to help each other. This is still new for me. I'm gonna make mistakes, and I'm gonna stumble as I get more comfortable with asking for help. But by signing up to this bus, I'm for the first time, making my world bigger instead of smaller.

GUNATILLAKE: I love how it was, I guess, a small everyday event — missing a bus in LA — that led to a change in how, ultimately, you chose to identify and evolve. Alex, how did it feel when you eventually took that leap to admit, “yes, I am someone who needs support.”

MORRIS: It felt not only scary for what I was admitting to myself, but also I think it's such an intense fear of judgment, which then already, as somebody who in a lot of situations, cannot be the most confident. Knowing that there's any eyes on you to kind of be analyzing you, you're like, my worst fear has come true. That's why a lot of people that have the condition that I have carry around a cane, it isn't actually for them to help them. It's a sign to other people. It is meant to be for you. So that if I bump into your table, and I knock over a drink, you don't stand up wanting to fight me. You're like, "you're blind. I can see the cane. I know why you did it." I feel like if I'm my full-evolved self, I think I need the cane, and I don't know if I'm emotionally there even yet, but I think I need it.

GUNATILLAKE: There's a perception you had isn't there that fear of asking for help. So how did it feel to finally push through that barrier? When you got on the bus? What's waiting, if you like, on the other side of being brave enough to ask for help?

MORRIS: It felt like such a safe space and a safe space that I'd never been in, and I didn't know I needed. It feels really good to go there and be like, I'm not putting on any airs. It feels like a genuine give and take of what I need help with, versus what I could help other people with. 'Cause I can help somebody else on the bus put in their belt, but they can say if I'm too close to the curb or if I'll trip. I just don't think that the term burden doesn't even exist in that air space.

GUNATILLAKE: In the final moment from your Meditative Story, we see how your new approach is helping to widen your world. Let's listen.

MORRIS: My shoes scuff against the cement floor as I push my way through a teeming crowd of strangers. I'm in an arena in downtown LA about to see one of my favorite musicians perform, Kendrick Lamar, and I'm here by myself. This is something I never would've done years ago, and if I'm honest, I've been nervous about it all day, but I'm here.

Now, I just need to find my seat. As I ascend the ramp into the darkened interior of the arena, I watch the details of the room fade into blackness and quickly glance around until I see what I need: The usher.

"Hi," I say to her, "Uh, I'm partially sighted. Can you help me get to my seat."

She hardly gives me a glance before saying, "Sure." With my hand on the shoulder of the usher, I know that everyone can see me, see that I need help, but for the first time, I don't care. This is saving me precious minutes of anxious, stumbling, and trying to bluff my way through the darkened dials. If I want to enjoy myself, I'm gonna have to be honest and vulnerable. Once at my seat, I have a little area all to myself. I put my anxiety aside and dance. I scream the lyrics along with the faceless crowd surrounding me. I have so much fun. It's one of the best nights I've had in years. My experience may not look like everyone

else's, but that's okay. This is my own way of doing things, and it's just as satisfying.

GUNATILLAKE: I myself just missed Kendrick playing in Glasgow recently, so I'm glad that you got the chance to enjoy him. And what struck me about this moment though is how proactive you were about asking for help and being open, open about your partial sightedness.

MORRIS: Yeah, I think honestly, I think that's so true, and I think those conditions, what I've learned is, how much that can be a shorthand, and I think I always misunderstood that. I think I thought it was then gonna have to be a conversation. What I see versus what I don't see. Especially when you're just talking to like an usher, that's just one of the things on their job list to do within the hour. They just wanna help you and carry on. And I think going on the Dial a Ride made me embrace a side of myself that allowed me to feel more confident and free to break through that barrier and be able to go on my own.

GUNATILLAKE: The freedom to go on your own, I love it Alex, a great ending thought. Thanks so much for sharing your story with us today.

MORRIS: Thank you so much, this was great.

GUNATILLAKE: It was great to speak to Alex again, to remind myself about his journey. How his response to diminishing vision in many ways dictated his experience and feelings. When masking the reality, he felt detached and as if his world was rapidly shrinking. But, with the courage to embrace his situation — to ask for the help he needed — his world instantly widened.

He was able to connect in ways he wasn't before, to have new and exciting experiences and to even support others in the same way they were supporting him. Maybe, before we meet again, you could try to do something similar yourself: taking the leap to voice a small vulnerability to a friend or a loved one. Shaping it in a way that allows another to help you solve a problem or talk through an anxiety. You might find, like Alex, that through the empathy of others a vulnerability might evolve into an opportunity for growth.

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 @meditativestory, or you can email us at hello@meditativestory.com. Take care now.