

Meditative Story Transcript – Tom Mustill Soul Curriculum

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

When life gets complex, it's often our first instinct to seek greater control, to plan for the predictable, and to try and anticipate what's approaching. It's certainly a discipline familiar to Tom Mustill, a nature filmmaker and now writer whose ability to capture breathtaking footage of animals around the world has been built on his mastery of mapping the chaotic. But does this attempt to control sometimes obscure the real wonder of the world? Are we swapping an appreciation of awe with an anxiety to always be the author of our fate?

In Tom's Meditative Story, he grapples with this question as spectacular experiences with the natural world rekindle his sense of wonder. Today I'm talking to Tom to find out more.

GUNATILLAKE: Hey, Tom. Good to have you with us today. How are you doing?

TOM MUSTILL: I'm very well, Rohan. Thanks for having me.

GUNATILLAKE: Your debut book, *How to Speak Whale*, was recently included in the *New Yorker's* Best Books of the Year list. How does it feel to have this recognition with your very first book?

MUSTILL: I mean, really nice. Yeah. What I find particularly interesting is, like, how many friends of mine are like, "oh, maybe I will read it." I was like, "were you not gonna read it before?" So yeah, so that's nice. At least my family will probably properly read it.

GUNATILLAKE: I'm looking forward to hearing more about your experiences whilst writing the book. Let's go back and listen to some early life experiences with your father when the natural world first became a teacher in your life.

MUSTILL: I lie on the old green carpet in the basement, playing with my electric train set. My nose twitches from the smell of rubbing alcohol we use to clean the tracks. I lay them out carefully in a wide looping oval. I then add my finishing touches: small black beetles I've gathered from the garden.

By my 6-year-old calculations, if I place them on the tracks, the train should run straight over them. I delicately balance an insect on the metal rail. And I see Dad's legs come into view. I lift my eyes to meet his. I feel as if I've been caught in the act.

“Well Thomas,” he says. “You should understand that what you are doing is your choice.” He slows down the word, “choice,” letting it land firmly in my head. I feel ashamed. I’ve always been very interested in non-human animals, but as I look down at the beetle still in my hand — its hair-like legs fluttering to nowhere; its beautiful dull black carapace — I feel like I’m seeing it with new eyes. Until now I had never thought that I had much responsibility towards the existence of other living things. That I had a choice. My father leaves the room. I take the beetles into the garden, and I let them go.

GUNATILLAKE: So as it happens, Tom, my eldest child is a six-year-old boy. Actually, he's seven this week, so happy birthday, Arne, if you're listening. And I know how hard it can be to guide young children. So Tom, why do you think your father offered you that choice instead of directing you in this moment?

MUSTILL: I don't really know, because I never ... And I'm really sad about this, I never actually asked him about this moment, even though it was so formative for me. He was a judge in the House of Lords, which is equivalent to the U.S. Supreme Court, and he had a very deep sense of fairness. And, I wonder if that background of being a judge and hoping that people could take responsibility for their own decisions without the need to rebuke or to just tell 'em what to do, I wonder if that's in his mind. And I really don't think it would've had the same effect on me if he just told me off. It was very startling, that experience.

GUNATILLAKE: I love the way you said that. Tom, you're a father now to your daughter Stella, I think ...

MUSTILL: Yes, that's right.

GUNATILLAKE: How have your own father's lessons influenced how you parent?

MUSTILL: The main thing that I think I bring from my father and my parenting with Stella is just silliness. He was very joyfully silly all the time and just loved playing. So I think, yeah, a sort of combination of wanting to help her be kind and to find her own pathway to doing that, but also being as silly as possible as often as possible.

GUNATILLAKE: Nice. And it sounds like you had a fair amount of freedom and free play growing up and exploring your backyard.

MUSTILL: Yes.

GUNATILLAKE: What did you learn from those early interactions with nature?

MUSTILL: I guess it was that you never knew what to expect. Every time you'd go outside, you'd always find something different. And I'm not sure I was really aware of that as a kind of learning, but that's what compelled me to keep going back. I always stumbled across something that intrigued me, even on the most boring, gray, dismal London day. I feel like sometimes in our nature storytelling, it's something we kind of miss, the sense of surprise and not knowing in advance.

GUNATILLAKE: Fast forwarding a little bit, you end up studying zoology and getting into nature filmmaking as we know. Could you maybe join the dots a little bit? Why did you go down that path, and why did telling stories about wildlife feel so important to you?

MUSTILL: I kind of came out of university with a sense of wanting to contribute to nature. But if you study the natural world, like the ecologist, Aldo Leopold, he wrote almost a hundred years ago that one of the sad parts of an ecological education is that you live in a world of wounds. You are just even more aware of the damage that we're doing. So I went off after university to work in conservation. I worked in a nature reserve in Mauritius with very, very rare birds, and I just got really bored and sad and lonely, and my girlfriend dumped me because I'd gone to live in a forest, and she was still living in the UK. And I came home from that just a bit lost really. And I didn't know if I wanted to continue going off and living in the middle of nowhere.

And to earn a bit of money, I got a job in a TV company delivering post and making tea. And I saw all of these people with these amazingly weird jobs telling stories, and I thought maybe I can do that by giving people more hopeful stories and examples of things going right and helping to spread the word about the things that weren't going right.

GUNATILLAKE: Lovely. Thank you, Tom. In the next clip, we find you at work in Australia trying to film a rare moment: the birth of a kangaroo. What should have been a magical experience leaves you feeling conflicted. Let's listen.

MUSTILL: We practice for this moment for weeks and plan it for almost a year. We can't miss it. The female puts her tail between her legs and sits down and gets up and falls over and sits down again. The little pink creature is coming out! We're in the perfect position to watch it wind its way up through her white belly fur. The small lights we have are just enough. It's dark but beautiful. And then, it's over. The mother stands, shakes, and hops off, her tiny baby safe inside. Andrew isn't celebrating. He turns to me and says, "Oh no." His camera hasn't worked. We miss the crucial moment we've been waiting for.

We're devastated. Andrew falls into a miserable mood. I'm deeply disappointed too. I imagine the producers asking us if we got the shot and having to tell them "No." The thought that I was just witness to a beautiful moment of life creation

that so few people get the chance to see barely occurs to me. All I choose to see is that we failed.

The next day, I sit alone with my camera. I watch a mob of kangaroos lounge about, each in their own sandy pit. It turns out this is what they mostly do all day. Sleeping is the heart of kangaroo essence. It's calming. My feelings of failure fade. But this is not what I'm expected to make a film about. I understand how nature shows choose to see wildlife. They prioritize brief moments of drama, conflict, and violence, giving the impression that that is what makes up the entirety of an animal's life. This makes these animals seem unrelatable to us, by only being spectacular. In these soft, low key moments I see what originally drew me to nature.

GUNATILLAKE: Even though you missed it on camera, it sounds like it was such a beautiful moment to witness. Wildlife shows tend to entertain us with drama and action rather than show the fuller picture of our life. Can you say a little bit more about how this experience filming the kangaroos maybe changed your approach to your work and life nowadays?

MUSTILL: Well, I think it added into a wider feeling that as I was progressing in this job, there was this weird and unnerving side effect, which is that I felt that my brain was turning into a sort of machine for repackaging experiences into 30 minute and 60 minute chunks that would work for a general audience. But that wasn't what all of those experiences were like.

Sometimes, I'd come home, and I'd tell my mom or my friends what happened, and then the things that went in the film were totally different. And I thought, why is it that the things that I think are most exciting or interesting or relatable are not going in the film? And that made me sad. Like on that shoot, one of the kangaroos ate the end of Bob Dylan's *Chronicles* that I was reading, which I found really vexing because I didn't know how it ended, and I was in the middle of a desert, and I wouldn't be able to get a hold another copy for months. But, I also thought it was really funny, but there's no way to put that into the film without upsetting the balance slightly.

GUNATILLAKE: And I really like what you said there about being the editor. What do you think's the risk of this curation, this editing process, from a wellbeing standpoint?

MUSTILL: I think it can be damaging if it gives you false ideas of other people and you're only ever overseeing things going really right, or really dramatically. And then if you take that as your frame of reference of what other people's lives are like, and there's quite a lot of research of this, of people getting sadder the more of this kind of material that they watch.

I'd say something I've given a lot of thought to, is what is the effect of the choices you make and what we show them of nature? Because if our lives are primarily lived in cities we rely more and more on traditional media or social media for an idea of what is natural. And I think there is a really damaging effect of nature films if they show that the lives of animals are always really violent or when ideas from biology get misunderstood and leak into the corporate world, like the idea of alpha males is totally misconceived, in sort of business speak. You know, alpha males in chimpanzee societies are great at forming coalitions, not just being big and tough and busting their way around.

You know, there are animals that have sex with the same sex. I was speaking to a disabled swimmer, and she told me that she felt really sad that you never saw any disabled animals in wildlife films. That they always seemed perfect, and she didn't find herself represented there. But mutation is the source of the diversity of life on earth and the reason it's survived. So why don't we show that? I think that can be really damaging.

GUNATILLAKE: Sure.

MUSTILL: Sorry, that's my favorite topic. So I'm gonna bang on a ballot for ages.

GUNATILLAKE: Quite right, but Tom, as you said, it can sometimes be hard to look up and see the wonder that's all around us. I was wondering what reminds you to look up and feel connected to wonder. How do you remind yourself to do this? Really keen for our listeners to get some pointers on that.

MUSTILL: Well, if I'm getting really stressed out, I just try to remember times when I've allowed myself to slow down, just reconnect with experiences that have been positive. I think it's often things that are really mundane and every day, just like leaves, on the pavement. But the other way that I connect with it is through my daughter because she's so fascinated by the world. She's at a stage of life where she doesn't yet know what adult humans have decided is interesting or uninteresting. So sometimes I turn on the tap, and she's just intrigued at putting her hand under the stream of the water and watching it dance around and play on her fingers, and that it can be warm or cold and splashed. So I think that childlike curiosity is totally the same as the feeling of trying to slow down when you are rushing around trying to get all of your to-do list done. And you don't even take the time to notice what the weather's like or what the trees are doing. It's a bit like, you know how smiles are contagious. When you see someone smiling, you smile, and then it can pass on to someone else too. It's a bit like that — wonder. It is better shared.

GUNATILLAKE: That's so lovely, Tom. In the next moment from your story, we take a break from your busy filming schedule with a vacation on the west coast of America after your father passed away. And it's during a kayaking trip in Monterey Bay that you have a life-changing experience.

MUSTILL: There are so many whales, and they are very active. Three surface about 40 yards away. They exhale in unison, blowing out big wet fishy broccoli-smelling breaths before diving down again. On the horizon we see humpbacks jumping clear out of the glassy surface. We stop paddling. There are whales coming and going from every direction. I've never seen this many before. It's astonishing and a bit intimidating. Part of me wishes I could see it through the safety of my camera.

Suddenly, an enormous whale comes out of the water in a full breach straight at our kayak. It's like a building rising up from the deep. Just unreal: a 30-ton whale is hovering in the air above me. The whale's body turns, falling directly on top of us. I just have time to think, "Oh, I'm going to die now."

In a flash, I'm underwater. All I see is churning white water surrounded by darkness. It feels like I'm quite deep. I'm thrown around violently. My life jacket then starts pulling me upwards. I swim in that direction. Charlotte must be dead. I'm surprised not to be in loads of pain. When I surface, I see Charlotte, and she's going, "Oh my god, oh my god," and grinning. We're both totally fine.

The tourists in the boat nearby have captured the whole thing on film. Soon it'll go viral. "British kayakers' terrifying close encounter with humpback whale." I'm left thinking, how am I not dead? There must be something I don't understand. I learn later that the whale saw us and turned its body away in mid-flight. This is why we're not killed. I remember the little boy about to squash the beetles on the train tracks. The words my father said in that moment. The power I realized I had. The choice I had to make about how to use that power. Now, I'm the one that was almost squashed.

But I still have a choice. I survived a rare and terrifying encounter. The question is: What do I do now?

Do I just go back to work? Back to what I was doing before? I can't. I feel I have a responsibility to this experience.

GUNATILLAKE: For anyone who's not seen the video, just search for Tom's name on YouTube, and you'll see their truly incredible escape. Now, Tom, you and Charlotte couldn't control what was happening in that moment when the whale breached. What did that moment teach you about fear and not being in control?

MUSTILL: I just think of all the moments in my life that I would consider the most beautiful, affecting, intimate, important; none of them were planned by me. They were all unanticipated. And if you try to control everything, you both frame how you see everything, but you also close off the opportunity of the world throwing things into your path and appreciating what's around you. And I think that's a really dramatic example —

a whale jumping out of the sea onto you — of something not going according to plan. But it happens in the rest of my life too. I just sort of now trust that life will be full and try not to borrow too much into my to-do list, so that I don't notice all the things that are happening around me and all of the opportunities and lives and people and closeness.

GUNATILLAKE: And there's a lovely moment when you recount the whale breach. Did you feel a sense of mystery, and have you been able to lean into that with your following work?

MUSTILL: Yes. I made a documentary, and I had a section in the film where I just listed all the things we don't know, because normally in films, it's a list of facts. But I wanted to list all the mysteries, and that was one of the things that people who watched it enjoyed the most. And I found that really fascinating because often in storytelling, you assume that people wanna know some answers. But audiences and readers like mysteries too. They like knowing the world is full of mysteries. And so I've been trying in my work since then to get that across that the world is constantly mysterious, and I feel that kind of speaks to the feeling of going to the garden as a child and just looking through the grass and not knowing what I was going to see, not understanding necessarily what I was seeing.

I went to a bioacoustics conference, and there was a woman talking about bird song, and she said that for a long time we've assumed that singing in birds is done by males for females. And it's taken an all-female team in the last decade to just go and check who's doing the singing. And they found that female birds sing in every single branch of the bird family tree, that singing isn't just a thing that males do. But because we'd decided this was settled, that there was no mystery, we'd actually changed our own perception of the singing all around the world. And this had actually misframed our understanding of what this singing could be. And I think that's a really beautiful example of: if you go around, assuming that there's no mystery there, you could be missing out on a much more interesting story.

GUNATILLAKE: That's certainly the message I'm taking away from this conversation, Tom, which is: make space for the mysterious in my life so that the wonderful can arise as well. Otherwise, I'd be risking closing myself off to it.

MUSTILL: I'd go further. I'd say: trust the mysterious will arrive in your life. I mean, if you go for a walk down in the countryside, you never come back and say, "Oh, it's great. Exactly what it anticipated happened." That's never what people say. They say, "Oh, you know, I saw a barn owl," or "the river was really loud today." Why don't we apply that to the rest of our walk through life? Not design plot and know in advance what it's gonna be like, but just to be interested to see what comes along.

GUNATILLAKE: There you go. Tom, thanks so much for being on the show and giving us the chance to dig a bit more into the elements of your story.

MUSTILL: Well, thank you so much for having me and for your curiosity in this. I never thought I'd end up talking to you about my control freakery and how I learnt to overcome it. So thank you.

GUNATILLAKE: It was so good to speak to Tom again. I loved how he gave me the chance to explore the wonders of the natural world with him once more. From the marvel of a tiny kangaroo baby to the great drama of a whale emerging fully from the water. In many ways, awe inspiring moments are everywhere around us, and yet, as Tom discovered, we're often blind to them when preoccupied with our own lives and worries. It took a brush with a hump back for Tom to realize that when we lean more into mystery, what we find and experience can be transformed in ways we never expected.

Maybe before we speak again, you could try some of Tom's advice. Take a walk in a local park. Slow down. Look at a plant; look at the sky. Notice when the people around you are tuned into something awesome, and use that as an invitation to join them. Feel your senses come alive in these moments of everyday magic. You know, it doesn't have to be a whale. Being present with something as small as a beetle or as common as a rainbow is enough. You might feel more nourished as a result.

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 your social media platforms via our handle [@MeditativeStory](#), or you can email us at hello@meditativestory.com. Take care now.