

Meditative Story Transcript – Eric Whitacre Soul Curriculum

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: This is Soul Curriculum, the companion show to Meditative Story, where we reconnect with your favorite 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.

We often have experiences in life that excite us, that resonate within and light us up; but how often do we use such moments as a guide for a new path we might take - and how willing are we to embrace what happens if we do? As a Grammy-award winning composer and conductor, Eric Whitacre's career in music — and journey through life — has been defined by his answer to these questions. In Eric's Meditative Story, his yearning to feel connected and his willingness to leave his comfort zone puts him on a road to self discovery that may provide wisdom for you and I, too. And I'm pleased to say that Eric is here with me now to talk through his experiences. Hi Eric, so great to have you on the show. How are you doing?

ERIC WHITACRE: Hey Rohan, it's so good to be here. I'm doing well, thank you.

GUNATILLAKE: Now Eric, a few of our meditative story team actually saw you play your special holiday show in Carnegie Hall in New York recently. How was it to perform there?

WHITACRE: So, every hero I've probably ever had in classical music has — at one time or another stood right where I was standing. Even more exhilarating than the stage, believe it or not, it's the dressing room, you're looking into the same mirror and combing your hair in the same place that all of these legends have been: Gustav Mueller to Judy Garland. It's a constant reminder of humility. For me, performing music is all about servicing the people on stage, the audience, and so it's a very easy switch to be flipped when you're standing in this room of inconceivable giants to remember: don't let any of this go to your head. You've got a job to do. And it's a humble one.

GUNATILLAKE: Now Eric, in your meditative story, you shared that as you're growing up, you have a sense of awareness that you are different from most of the people in your small town. You have an outward exuberance, which belies some of the inner turmoil you feel as a teenager. This all culminates when you and some friends climb to the top of an old dam and you find yourself transfixed by the water rushing through some 20 feet below. Let's listen.

WHITACRE: The water mirrors how I feel inside: turbulent. I have all this forward momentum and outward exuberance, and below the surface, a quiet, dark current. That combination can feel like a dissonance in my own body, but it's expressed so effortlessly in the water. Everything — the motion of swaying tree branches, the voices of my friends — falls away. It's only me and the water. It's

so much bigger than me. It's beautiful. And I want to be a part of it. I'm not considering the danger, or the overwhelming power, only that I'm pulled toward this force of nature. Without thinking, I jump.

The fall takes an eternity. When I hit the surface, feet first, I sink fast. There's a churn, and I'm thrown into a cyclone of water. It's louder than I imagined, and even bigger than I'd understood. Literally and metaphorically, I'm in over my head. My lungs fill with water. I'm tossed around like a ragdoll. My back scrapes along the bottom of the river. I become desperate. Finally, the current throws me to the surface. Popping out of the river knocks the water out of my lungs. I cough and spit up everything I can. My friends scramble down to me, their faces panicked. They help me up onto the bank. I lie there, in disbelief, having come so close to death.

Why did I jump? I can't fully explain it. I didn't want to hurt myself. I just have this instinct to leap into whatever I find fascinating and beautiful. To push myself to learn, regardless of the danger. The intensity of the experience at the dam shakes me. But soon, I find myself drawn back to the power I felt emerging from the water. I'm looking for something. Something that can give me that feeling, and make me feel connected, alive, and fully me.

GUNATILLAKE: That's an extraordinary scene, Eric, and I was wondering, do you think about that experience often?

WHITACRE: I do actually. It's the perfect metaphor for the way that I usually move through life, which is that I find myself on a precipice, and there's this quiet that comes over me. And then just the urge to jump to be a part of the thing. And for instance, when I'm composing music, every piece I feel like I'm diving inside the thing in order to become it or to absorb it or to be one with it, to be connected with it.

GUNATILLAKE: So, Eric, for you, it was less about it being a risky experience of more about joining in with something?

WHITACRE: It's the perfect description. So, you know, when you're seventeen you don't even know the concept of risk, right? You just just do. These things, I never think of in terms of risk or benefit, I'm just compelled, I'm overwhelmed by this need to be part of that thing.

GUNATILLAKE: Is there a danger at all in leaping somewhat blindly into the deep end, so to speak?

WHITACRE: I think it's the only way to grow, and I've also always believed that if you want to do something, you need to just jump into the deep end of the pool and then learn how to swim. It's the only way to do it. If you're going to learn a language, then go

somewhere where no one speaks your language and get hungry. That's the key is to constantly push yourself way beyond your comfort zone and in that moment, at least for myself, I always surprise myself, the capacity I have to learn and to grow when pushed way beyond what I thought I could do.

GUNATILLAKE: Eric, I've heard you talk about yourself as a bit like a timpani drum with reference to the empathy that you recognize in yourself. Could you say a bit more about that?

WHITACRE: It's an emotional vulnerability that I think I've had since I was young. It's been amplified as I get older, but I imagine myself as the head of a timpani drum, which is usually made from calf skin or something that vibrates very easily. One of the things, if you ever watch an orchestral concert and the timpani player isn't playing, they usually have their hand on the head of the drum to keep it from vibrating because it'll pick up every vibration that's happening in the orchestra, and the instrument will ring. And I know myself, no matter what situation I'm in, I'm somehow picking up the emotional resonance around me and vibrating. Almost without wanting to. And so, I've learned over the years to metaphorically keep a hand on the head of my timpani drum. If I'm in an intense emotional situation, I can still be present for it and not be vibrating at the resonance of the room.

GUNATILLAKE: That's fascinating, Eric. And what would I be if I was an instrument? My instinct says cello because there's something about it, the way people play the cello is so physical. It's like the whole body is playing it. Do you see this connection between instruments and people more generally?

WHITACRE: I think I do all the time. Cello is also my favorite instrument. It's a string instrument but it's not on their face so you can have this very human connection with them while they're playing their instruments. And I tend, yes, to think of people in my own life as different kinds of instruments. Oboe players, for instance, are typically meticulous and very thoughtful because they have to build their own reeds and live and die by the quality of the reed they've got that night. It's very, very intense and so generally oboe players have a personality like that. And so even if I meet somebody who's not a musician, I might think of them as an oboe player. Louis Kahn, the architect, said it best that even a brick aspires to be more than a brick. And when you're playing in a big orchestra, you're just a small part of this bigger thing that's being made. But at the same time then, as a composer, I'm trying to give each person a part that feels special and essential and has its own little arc, even with the little bit that they're playing, they feel as important as everybody else to make this thing that's bigger than themselves.

GUNATILLAKE: That theme really feels like something that goes through the whole of your story, which is also for me about finding and embracing the thing that lights you up, that leads to that sense of flow and connection with others. With all the things that you've

learned in your time since then if you could go back and talk to that younger Eric at the top of the dam what would you tell him?

WHITACRE: Huh. I certainly wouldn't tell him not to jump. If anything, I would tell him, don't worry. It's gonna be alright. This is your path. It's unknown. There will be these times when it's incredibly rocky, you'll question the entire thing. Don't worry. It's going to unfold in ways that you can't imagine. And, it's going to unfold sort of whether you want it to or not. So, quit fighting against the stream.

GUNATILLAKE: Beautiful. Thank you Eric. And moving into your next clip: in college you're invited to join a student choir, and even though you are initially hesitant to join the group, your first rehearsal with them unlocks something totally unexpected. Let's listen.

WHITACRE: "Let's do warmups," says David. At once, the singers around me jump into lip trills. I feel my face flush. This choir thing is going to be as embarrassing as I'd feared. I just started college; I can't have people see me doing this.

David steps up to the podium and says, "Let's sing the Kyrie from the Requiem by Mozart." What's a Kyrie? I don't have time to find out. David lifts his arms, there's a breath, and boom. The basses all around me begin to sing. Then the altos, then the sopranos, and then the tenors. Kyrie eleison, they sing. Voices float around me and through me and above me. The harmonies create a vibration that envelops me. The different lines dance together in three-dimensional counterpoint. My brain lights up like a Christmas tree. I'm overwhelmed by the complexity and humanity on display. The craft and the beauty of it, the pure beauty. It makes my heart want to cave in.

I'm reminded of my nights looking up at distant stars through my telescope. I'm reminded of the pull I felt toward the turbulent water in the dam. Throughout my life, I've been drawn to things that give me this fleeting feeling of connecting to something larger than myself. But here, standing in this choir, letting my voice ring out and join others in harmony, I feel a connection that is more immediate and resonant than any before. My passion is shared by everyone in this room. I've found my tribe. These are my people. I feel electrified. Open. I fit in here. As myself. My whole self.

GUNATILLAKE: It's so clear, Eric, from that clip, how incredible it can be when we take the opportunity to be immersed in new experiences. What is it about music and importantly performing it with others in a group that's so powerful? Do you think it's something that anyone could experience, even if they're not a musician?

WHITACRE: I absolutely do. I don't think you need to be a musician at all, specifically with singing. When I think back on the story, I thought that it had to do with this

awakening of a musical language within me. And now looking back, I realize that actually it wasn't the music, it was the experience of suddenly being part of something larger than myself. And what happens with singing is that the conductor stands up and he takes that breath. It's not just that we all breathe together at the same time, which already is a magical experience. You just reflexively breathe in exactly the way the conductor breathes. It's uncanny the way it happens, and I've done this before in front of audiences of bankers or doctors or lawyers. It doesn't matter if you're a musician or not, but that single breath, it completely unifies the room. There's a unifying vision in that one breath that changes everything. It clarifies and cleanses every part of you, and it also on a personal level, doesn't leave room for anything but the breath and that moment. There's just nowhere else you can be but there. And it's only in retrospect when you look back and you realize, oh, time stopped, disappeared for me for those seconds or minutes that I was singing together with people and I was truly part of something larger than myself. And once you've had a taste of that, even in the smallest way, you'll chase that dragon for the rest of your life.

GUNATILLAKE: I think that's absolutely right and I guess the two things that come to mind when you talk about that, Eric, the first is going to football matches or soccer matches, as you might say. They're noisy, loud; full of songs. Some of them, not particularly polite, but there's something about being in that space with thousands of people. I really think that shared communal experience is a massive part of why people go to football matches. There's a magic to it. And the other thing that your response brought to my mind was just in meditation groups or in retreat settings or classes because there's a shared intention and everyone's oriented towards the same thing and doing the same practice. There's a real connection there and I find actually that I can get way more concentrated just leading a five minute meditation in person than I can in doing an hour's hardcore meditation practice.

WHITACRE: I think the shared intention part is the key. And I think that what happens is that the moment your voice or your breath becomes part of something larger than yourself, it's now a manifestation of compassion that you actually are physicalizing the intellectual idea of compassion. You have to listen to others. You have to be present and aware of others and their differences and how you were just a part of this larger group. Even when you were describing the football match story, I got chills thinking that's it. The key is so simple.

GUNATILLAKE: And clearly, Eric, you've actively sought out experiences that make you alive and make you feel like yourself. And if others are hoping to do the same, what could you maybe say to them about how to pursue those kind of feelings?

WHITACRE: So my sister she's in her forties, my younger sister, and she just joined a choir for the first time. So this is a huge step for my sister. First, you can imagine her older brother is 'Mr. Choir', so already that's, you know, that's this thing that she has to carry into every rehearsal room. We have the same last name. She thinks that she's got

a terrible voice. She's always just kept quiet and she tells people she's tone deaf. So she comes to it with all this baggage, but she did it anyway. She went and she had the time of her life. So often it's a fear of the unknown, the moment you start to do it, it's so different and richer and gentler and lighter than you thought it was going to be. And it awakens this thing in you that is fascinated and wants to be part of it, that wants to learn, that wants to grow. And once that thing is awakened, then all of the fear and the trepidation; evaporates. And then you're only in the moment. So I guess my advice would be to practice if you're at the supermarket and you're afraid to have that interaction with the person who's checking out your groceries, just push back against that a little bit and try it, and then it becomes an adventure. During the covid lockdown, I became enamored with this Japanese art form called kintsugi. And kintsugi is the healing of broken pottery, and instead of using clear glue and hiding the breaks, it's filled with gold epoxy. So you illuminate the breaks. And it's a gorgeous metaphor for a thing that's been broken, becomes not only stronger but more beautiful once you heal it. But what do I know about painting and pottery in it? This is so far away from what I normally would do, and I tried it and it wasn't perfect by any means but the experience of making it; it illuminated my mind. And the virtual choir that I ended up making during the pandemic times is all influenced by kintsugi. You can even watch the video now, and you see these thousands and thousands of voices from around the world and they come together and there's these little light-filled glues that are connecting everybody together.

GUNATILLAKE: I have to go look it up again now with that lens. It'd be really fun to listen to it and watch it. Eric, the final clip is another moment of connection, and it's from the part of your meditative story where you've been a professional composer and conductor for twenty five years, and you perform a concert at Union Chapel in London. Let's listen.

WHITACRE: As a conductor, I perform with my back to the audience. I don't worry about presenting myself a certain way, or living up to an expectation. I focus all my attention on the musicians, on the work we will do together to bring this music to life. I take a breath. The singers mirror me. We breathe not just at the same speed and volume, but with the same emotional intention. It's extraordinary — there's a magical quality to it. As a group, we are instantly unified. Terabytes of emotional information pass back and forth between us. This is the power of having found the space where I can fully be who I am. Creating music is a genuine communal experience. Between me and the choir, the choir and the audience, the audience and me. We're all taking the same journey. From one side of the river to the other. Searching for those connections in life means keeping your heart open to experiences of awe, and not being afraid to follow where they lead. I make eye contact with the singers. It's a profoundly intimate moment — while singing, people are as vulnerable and open as they can possibly be, and in that state, I look into each of their eyes. I allow them to look into mine. I feel as if I'm looking into the thousands of stars in the night sky. I

never feel more like myself than when in a room with other musicians making music. That is who I am.

GUNATILLAKE: That's such a gorgeous connection between your music and looking in the night sky. Eric, thank you. And once you've found choral music and experienced how profoundly it resonated with you, you dug deep and obviously pursued it as a career. What advice would you give to someone who has dreams of professionally pursuing the things that lights them up? Can that energy, that inspiration, be sustained when it's your day-to-day job?

WHITACRE: Yes, is the short answer. But I think that what needs to happen is that if you have a passion and you start to make it your job, then you have to take moments to check in with yourself and see where you are. Are you being overwhelmed by this? Are you feeling stress from it? Are you associating all of these negative things with the thing that you love? And if that starts to happen, then it's important to take a step back and go back to the purest form of the thing that you do. So for me, the purest form is actually making music. And I have a seventeen year-old son now who's a jazz musician. He'll take out his bass and I'll sit with the piano, my wife will sing. We do Stevie Wonder, we do Chet Baker, we do Stan Getz. You know, we do, we do just music that is of the body and of the soul, and just alive and fun. And then when I go back to the work part of it, I'm able to separate the idea that there's the grind of the work and then there's my love of the thing. And those are two different things.

GUNATILLAKE: So when it comes to your sense of connection, Eric, what is it about the act of creating original music that's different to performing?

WHITACRE: My first and truest love is world building and this need to be inside a thing, to jump in, to be one with it. It stops being about notes and chords and construction, and it has to be, who am I? What do I really feel about this? What do I really think? The image I always have in my mind is of this jagged rock in the middle of a rushing river, and that the composing is year upon year, upon year, that water rushing over the rock and that it's slowly smoothing the rough edges. I think that for me is what the composing is; it's a practice and a discipline that's gently transforming me over my lifetime.

GUNATILLAKE: And it's so clear that you've found the things that light you up and the things that get you excited. Do you have any advice for anyone listening who is maybe still looking for that thing or maybe has many different things which excite them and maybe that is draining and dissipates their energy too much?

WHITACRE: Generally, I would say, if I can use composition as an example, when I talk to young composers, the number one thing that I hear all the time is they haven't really started composing yet because they don't know enough that they don't have enough training, they don't have enough schooling. And especially in our world of composition, you know, you're comparing yourself to Bach, to Beethoven, to Mozart, to Stravinsky. It's

these impossible giants, and from my experience, actually not knowing what you're doing is a superpower. You have this very small window of time before you start to become an expert in it. But before that happens, you have just pure beginner's mind. And what you'll do as you enter into it, is you'll make mistakes that are really inventive. I can look at the first pieces that I wrote now with lots of schooling and experience behind me, and I can see the error in the way that they were composed. And at the same time, there's this raw inventiveness that I would never do now because that window is closed to me, the window of time where I didn't know what I was doing. And so actually I would encourage anybody in whatever discipline it is they're about to jump into, if they feel for a moment that hesitation because they don't know what they're doing: embrace that, that's a gift. You'll do things that are so interesting with those first steps that you take into something that you've never done before.

GUNATILLAKE: Something I find myself is that when you default into a pattern, it can feel dull and there's no energy there but you need that bit of friction or not knowing to make it interesting for yourself, because if it's not interesting for yourself, then your audience won't enjoy it.

WHITACRE: Yeah, exactly. What I'm looking for is that electricity, that juice, and that only comes from a new idea. From something that I hadn't seen before. That ignition of inspiration, that's what I'm constantly searching for. If it's got a little bit of that in there, then people who are listening to the music, they can't even put words to it, but they feel that lightning bolt.

GUNATILLAKE: That's really well put. Thank you. And clearly, Eric, it all, points back to this idea of community and our role within it and how we find flow and a bigger sense of ourselves. What's the role of community and connection in making us feel bigger than our individual selves?

WHITACRE: There's this, this phenomenon that happens when you're singing that you get together a room full of people and it's just ecstatic. The sound is, it's almost impossible to describe, but then the conductor will say: "okay, this time through, listen to the people around you. So listen to the person to your left, to your right behind you. Just listen to their voice and make sure that you are blending." And what happens is then that sound, that wall of sound becomes something wholly different. It becomes opaque and gentle and always softer, right? Because now people are listening. But in that moment you feel people aware of the people around them on this very deep level and I've often thought that that's an easy metaphor to take outside singing and to apply anywhere that no matter what is happening, no matter what the group of people is, no matter how intense the situation is, just for a moment, quiet oneself and just listen. Really listen to the people around them. It's amazing. I've found in my own life, the moment I do that, everything flips, I can hear pain or I can hear suffering in other people. And then my approach completely changes that instead of where I feel that there's an attack, it's

actually a cry for help. It's the easiest switch to turn to empathy. And the more you do it, I think the more empathetic a person you become, and it bleeds over into your real life.

GUNATILLAKE: I think that's such a wonderful insight there, you know, to listen first. And so when you do act or speak or sing, it's an act of blending. I like that metaphor very much. Thank you Eric, and thank you so much for joining us on the show today.

WHITACRE: That's truly my pleasure. Thank you, Rohan.

GUNATILLAKE: It was so great to speak with Eric again, retracing the path that ultimately led him to performing his musical creations in places like Carnegie Hall. The thing I found most interesting about Eric's story was his thought that we all have an inbuilt compass that can help us navigate the many roads that life places in front of us, if we only tune into it. Though jumping into the water at the dam was extreme and not something advisable, this moment allowed Eric to realize certain experiences made him feel connected and alive, and that by pushing into these experiences, he felt more inspired and closer to his authentic self. Music soon flowed through him like the water from the dam, and now his music flows around the world. Maybe before we next meet, we can all take a steer from Eric's guidance. Sense in your body how certain situations make you feel. It might be a friend you're meeting, a certain project at work or a new hobby you are chewing over. If you feel excitement, intrigue, light, especially if it's outside your comfort zone, maybe push into it some more. Who knows where this new path might take you?

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.