

Meditative Story Transcript – Jade Bowler

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: When we're young, we're encouraged to dream big and aim high. And while having goals is important, the pressure of achieving those goals can sometimes be overwhelming. Our guest this week, Jade Bowler, best known for her study-focused YouTube channel UnjadedJade, spent her teenage years embroiled in academic pressure, solely focused on her big plans for the future. It's only after those plans fall apart that Jade recognizes the importance of smaller, quieter moments in her life. Moments that she calls, casual magic.

In this series, we combine immersive first-person stories, breathtaking music, and mindfulness prompts so that we may see our lives reflected back to us in other people's stories. And that can lead to improvements in our own inner lives.

From WaitWhat, this is Meditative Story. I'm Rohan, and I'll be your guide.

The body relaxed. The body breathing. Your senses open, your mind open, meeting the world.

BOWLER: The bus slows to a stop. As the door swings open, I feel the crisp autumn breeze against my face. I shift my rucksack on my shoulder and walk down the steps. I'm 16 and on my way home from school. Two other girls get off at the same time as me, but they live in the other direction. With a casual smile and a wave goodbye, I begin my solitary walk home. The streets of my small town are lined with trees. I pause and notice the light dapple through the foliage. I love this time. It's a quiet moment to breathe and reflect on my day.

The leaves rustle under my feet as I ruminate on my English teacher's analysis of Shakespeare's Othello. She explores how the play's images of womanhood actually represent male fantasies. Her commentary makes me examine my own ideas about gender. Most of the other kids at school wouldn't call this type of analysis relaxing, but for me it's fun. I'm a bit of a nerd. I constantly raise my hand in class. I love reading. I just love the feeling of learning more about the world. Widening my perspective. Discovering new possibilities.

I'm not popular, but I have a really great group of friends. We gather at lunch, share food, discuss the drama from class that day. Little moments throughout the day at school just delight me. Even the silence midway through taking an exam where the world quiets

and all I can hear is the scribbling of pens on paper, or the bright scent of oranges that floods our French classroom when Madame Fletcher brings freshly picked Satsumas as a snack.

I pressure myself to get good grades. I want to have a good future. I want to be a success, in every sense of the word.

And at the end of the day, I just adore learning and being with my friends. For me, school's a safe space.

I push open the front door of our house and feel the energy of my world shift.

I hear crying.

In the living room my mom is curled up on the floor near the sofa. There's an empty bottle of wine on the table. A glass on the floor. Tears stream down her cheek. I instantly feel the urge to comfort her. I reach my arms out to hug her and ask "What's wrong?"

She pushes me away. "Don't touch me," she snaps. "I don't want you here. Leave me alone."

This isn't the first time something like this has happened. Why does she act this way? I'm so confused.

I take a step back. Mum continues to sob. Dad's away for work, as he often is, but my younger brother's home. I don't want him to hear this. I race upstairs with a snack from the kitchen to make sure he's ok. My brother smiles, takes the fig roll and turns back to his video game.

That's my cue to quietly make myself a cup of tea, escape to my bedroom, and close the door. I unpack my notebook and try to forget about the scene downstairs. I don't know what's happening with mum. I'm not old enough to understand her struggles with alcohol and depression. Right now, I just feel sad, I feel scared, and I feel angry. This is why I don't like having friends come around to the house. I hide this part of my life. Alone feels safe. I exhale.

At home, my bedroom is my sanctuary. The sunlight streams in through the curtains and dances along my L-shaped desk. My bookshelves burst with books. Many of them about young female protagonists overcoming hardship and changing their worlds. On my wardrobe, I've pasted drawings of my favorite characters and bits of fan fiction I've written.

Up here, I convince myself that everything's fine while also knowing that it's not. I escape into the elaborate worlds of my favorite books. Lose myself in my pile of notes from

class. And look out my window at the leaves swaying in the breeze. At my desk I feel so much potential, I can do so much with my time. It's all up to me. I imagine myself in a place where that will always be true. Where I can be someone new. Someone grand.

For me, that place is Oxford. It's the top university in the United Kingdom, possibly the world. And it's where I want to go when I finish school. My parents weren't lucky enough to go to uni, but I want to show them that I can make the most out of the opportunities they've given me. I want to leave all of this for something more, and I also want to make my parents proud. I know people at Oxford will care about learning as much as I do. That I'll have the opportunity to blaze a new path, maybe write a book or start my own business.

I have so many things I want to do in my life. Oxford is just the first step.

I reach for my tea. The cup warms my hands. I raise it to my face, inhaling slowly. Peppermint and licorice. My favorite. It feels like a hug. The fresh and earthy scent tingles the tip of my nose. For a second, I forget everything else. I lose myself in the joy of this very simple moment. The warmth of the tea courses through my body. I feel grounded.

I take a seat at my desk, pull out a textbook, and get to work.

GUNATILLAKE: The room being surrounded by books. The tea, the dreams of Oxford. These are the places and objects of safety Jade goes to when the world is difficult and confusing. What are your objects of safety? Knowing what they are, remembering their power, is a good thing to do. So when you need them, you can reach for them.

BOWLER: I leap up the steps of our house two at a time. Someone yells a question at me from the kitchen but I don't hear it. I slam my bedroom door behind me and look down at the letter I've been holding tightly in my hand since I grabbed it from the front doorstep. Here it is. The letter from Oxford.

Over the past year, school has become an even bigger part of my identity. I spend countless late nights preparing for exams, revising, reading and re-reading the books my teachers assign. I scour the internet for better study tips and when I don't find any that work, I decide to make a YouTube channel of my own where I can share what I've learned and talk about my academic hopes and aspirations. It's starting to get popular.

There are times when things feel really stressful, like I have to do everything perfectly, but it's all been worth it for this.

I unfold the paper and my eyes start frantically scanning. I've pictured seeing the word "accepted" so many times and ... And it's not here. I see the phrase "Many qualified applicants..." My chest feels like it's collapsing. I didn't get in.

Now the room is falling in on me. My plans. The path I had imagined for myself. All gone in a second. It took so much effort just to imagine myself at Oxford. To imagine that I might be worthy of that level of institution. This was my chance to flee the nest, escape the troubles at home, and redefine myself somewhere totally new. This was supposed to be the beginning, and now it's the end. I'm left feeling, am I even clever?

I grip the letter in my hand and walk down the hall to my brother's room. He can see in my face that something's wrong. He puts down his video game controller. I hand him the letter and he reads it. "Oh," he says. "That sucks." It's such an underwhelming reaction that I almost laugh. And then, I start to cry. He sits with me like that for a while. Neither of us knows what to say.

I cry and I cry. It's all I can think to do.

I sink into the deep navy blue vinyl seat and nervously tap my hand on the table in front of me. A garbled announcement comes through the intercom. I strain to recognize a word or phrase in French. Every now and then, I look over my shoulder to check that my rucksack is in the luggage pile. Yep, still there. I'm on a train going through the tunnel under the English Channel. It's been ten months since my Oxford rejection and I'm on my way to Paris. It's my first solo trip, ever.

When I didn't get into Oxford, I decided to take a gap year — some time to decompress and figure things out. By a stroke of luck, I won a rail pass which lets me travel by train to any country in Europe. For so long, I've been on a hamster wheel of studying and extracurriculars and anxious exam-taking with a singular goal. My identity and self-worth was tied to that goal. Now that it's fallen away, I feel lost. I'm not sure what's next. It's disorienting.

I figure, if I'm not going to university right away, I might as well see the world. Learn a few things. But that's so scary too. I've never been away from home on my own before. All my friends are off at university. It's just me, a bag, and a train.

In the darkness of the tunnel, my mind starts to turn inwards. What if I can't figure things out when I get to Paris's central station? What if I can't navigate the city? What if I fail at this too? When I imagined my big adventures while sitting alone in my bedroom, they felt so different from this.

Suddenly, the train car floods with golden light. We emerge from the tunnel and outside my window the French countryside rolls by. Trees, farms, little stone buildings crumbling with age. The land's gradient shifts from rich tea-green to baked orange to crop-yellow with faint white dots of sheep throughout. The sun hangs low over the vast hills. I feel a warmth and appreciation for all of these small, beautiful things that I'm so lucky to see.

I turn my attention to the tray in front of me: my steaming cup of the peppermint and licorice tea I brought from home. My favorite. A couple walks by speaking French to one another. Beautiful.

I take my journal out of my bag and write down a few of the things I see. I flip back through the pages and see countless similar lists. Some written at home in my room. Some at school. Some on the bus. I've always found joy in these little everyday things. These moments that are imbued with a casual magic. Glancing at the pages, I see how writing them down has put me in a mindset to look for them in my daily life. My fear and uncertainty start to melt away.

So I don't exactly know what my life will look like in a year. I'm still me. I'm still Jade.

I gaze out the train window for hours, taking the time to appreciate every beautiful thing I see. I feel deeply grateful for where I am. For the possibilities in my future, and also for what's right here.

GUNATILLAKE: It's a balance isn't it? Holding an orientation we want to go in, and also appreciating what is here. What is here? Is there something now in your experience that might evoke some gratitude, even if just a spark?

BOWLER: The streets of Seoul are hectic. Huge highrise buildings line every block of the stylish Gangnam District. Everyone walks quickly, with purpose. They keep their eyes down as if they know exactly where they're going. I've struggled to find my footing since moving to South Korea a month ago.

I'm here studying abroad for my university. It's a unique program that lets me travel to seven different countries while I take classes online. I spend my days studying intensively with a group of other passionate students, and I spend my nights exploring new cities, expanding my knowledge of the world. It's the grand adventure I always dreamed about in my bedroom. And it's also overwhelming.

My first two weeks in Seoul were spent in quarantine, in a colorless room with bars on the windows. After emerging into the city, I was hit by a wave of culture shock. Everyone is so fashionable and well dressed, I stand out like a sore thumb. People shush me on the bus for talking too loud. I even get confused by the traffic lights.

My failure to adapt quickly makes me anxious. And lonely. And homesick.

One day, I visit my friend Ujeza and tell her, "I'm feeling really sad today." I don't really know what else to say. I just don't want to be alone right now.

She says, "Would you like to go for a walk and just exist in companionable silence?" Companionable silence. It's a unique part of the culture in Seoul that intrigues me. You

don't have to fill the space between two humans with gossip or giggles, or words at all. You can just co-exist, side by side, enjoying one another's company, in silence. At this moment, it's exactly what I need.

So that's what we do. We go for a walk, arm-in-arm, and we just silently exist next to each other. We pass by a brightly lit corner shop, bursting with cute packaged snacks. We head over a bridge spanning the Han river and watch the sunlight twinkle on the water. Sunsets in Seoul are amazing. Full of vibrant colors. I take a moment to admire the cherry blossom trees, with their first buds peaking out, awaiting the coming spring.

Without the distraction of conversation or worries about school or what the future holds, I find myself embracing the smaller things in life. I'm intentional about doing this now. I feel comfortable and myself again.

For years, I thought my life's worth depended on how many big accomplishments I had. On which school I got into. How much money I made. Or how far I could get from my troubles at home. But now I know that life isn't about big things. Because 99% of life is small. It's everyday. It's boring.

It's a cup of tea or a walk through the leaves. It's a quiet laugh with a friend or a video call with my mom. She's been sober now for four years and I'm so incredibly proud of her. In spite of all her struggles, she's remained one of the strongest, most vulnerable women I've ever met. I'm grateful for every second we have together because each one of them, the good and the bad, feels like magic.

Having goals and a purpose are still important to me, but they're not everything. I know I feel best when I turn my attention back to where I am right now, to these little, everyday things. I don't need to be in a particular place or with particular people, I know I can always find beauty in the mundane. I know I don't need to get certain grades or have a certain number of followers. I don't need to accomplish grand things in order to be worthy of a beautiful life. Because the beauty of life is everywhere. I just have to choose to see it, choose to find it.

Halfway through our quiet walk around Seoul, the snow starts to fall. My friend and I stop and look out over the neighborhood before us. It's laid out in a chaotic fashion, with a bunch of houses stacked right on top of each other. There are lots of flat roofs, bars and restaurants. Each building stands out in its own unique way. It makes for an interesting skyline. I look at my friend and see the snowflakes in her hair. We look at each other and smile and I feel this lightness. I feel the cold air on my face. It all feels like magic.

GUNATILLAKE: Thank you Jade.

I was very taken by the natural wisdom that just flows through Jade's story. And there were two moments during the story which got my meditation senses tingling, so let's explore them for our closer today.

The first is Jade's journaling which she talks about while on the train over to Paris. In her version of the practice, she writes down what she sees. Nothing more. Simple observation. So let's start with that ourselves.

With eyes open and face relaxed, notice what you see that brings a whisper of delight. Just knowing what is here that is lovely and writing them down - not literally - noting them in our mind instead. My bookshelf. That picture of Greek goddesses. A plant. Just seeing what is here. Without judgments or stories.

Now let's switch senses to listening. What is here to be heard? Again, just knowing it. Giving it a name or label and noting it with our awareness.

While on the train, Jade recognizes that writing down the lovely things she sees, however small, puts her in a mindset to notice them outside of her journaling practice. So may that also be true for us. By practicing being aware of the lovely in our experience on purpose, we'll start to do it more organically in our life too, and therefore have just that little bit more joy in our days.

So with that in mind let's turn to the body sense, the physical sensations that are here in our experience.

Letting your awareness percolate through the body, "write down", note the feelings and sensations which feel a bit lovely. In technical meditation-language, we call these sensations with a pleasant feeling-tone. And it can be quiet. So with the breath gentle and the attention soft, take a look at what is here in the body.

Jade also speaks about how her writing down practice helps her fear and uncertainty melt away. It provides her a form of security, an anchor maybe.

So now let's turn to the mind. If there are any thoughts, emotions, or moods that have a pleasant feeling-tone, note those too.

The second practice that stood out to me from Jade's story — ha I love it so much. It's the companionable silence that she is introduced to by her friend in Korea. In Jade's version, Ujeza and her walk together. Exploring the city, arm in arm, without the pressure of conversation.

In our version, let's just be together. Me. You. The massive amount of people who will do this meditation with us this week. Being together in companionable silence. You here for me, me here for you.

Thank you, that was fun.

And of course, thank you Jade. May all be well. May your fear and uncertainty melt away.

We'd love to hear your personal reflections from Jade's episode. How did you relate to her story? You can find us on all your social media platforms through our handle @meditativestory. Or you can email us at: hello@meditativestory.com