

Meditative Story Transcript – Curtis Rivers

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CURTIS RIVERS: Now, as I rocket towards Earth, I feel the ice cold airflow on the tops of my exposed feet. I know where they are. I line them up. And I fall straight. A few micro adjustments change my whole trajectory. My canopy opens. I glide down, pull the brakes, and my feet hit the ground gently.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Curtis Rivers has an exceptional ability to visualize his body in space. It's what enables him to master a host of specialized skills from martial arts to sky-diving and to achieve his dream of being a Hollywood stuntman. But this acute focus prevents him from recognizing that his dream isn't all he thought it would be. In this week's episode, Curtis shares how it's never too late to give ourselves permission to picture and discover the future that we want.

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.

RIVERS: I stand on the top diving platform and look at the water a long way down. Twenty-five feet, at least. I smell the chlorine. I hear laughter and splashing from the pool. I close my eyes. Friends' voices echo all around me. My heart pounds in my chest. I picture the jump I want to do. A flying, heroic leap, cycling my arms and legs and then squeezing my ankles together for a dramatic splash.

"I'm leaping off a burning building!" I shout as I run to the end of the platform. With one final bound, I leap off the edge. I soar through the air, my stomach drops as I hang for a split second before hitting the water hard. I sink like a stone to the bottom. The pressure builds in my ears. I feel the smooth tiles of the pool bottom and push myself upward. As I break the surface to catch my breath, I see my friends cheering, smiles on their faces. My face breaks into a huge grin.

I like being known as the best tree-climber, rope swinger and diving-board jumper in the whole school. I'm a skinny kid and not really athletic. I like reading, and I write stories and poems. I won a prize once in our town's local writing contest. But that's kind of embarrassing. I may not play football or cricket, but this I can do.

My jump was perfect. The moves were right out of my favorite TV show, *The Fall Guy*.

Every Friday night, in the small front room of our end terrace house on the Council Estate I call home, I settle in with my Mum and my younger sister to watch *The Fall Guy*. It's a show about a Hollywood stuntman who moonlights as a bounty hunter, and I absolutely love it. Dad's home from the pub tonight. He mutters "What a load of rubbish."

"Come on, dad. It's cool. That's what I want to do when I grow up."

"People like us don't have jobs like that," he says embarrassed. My eyes remain glued to the screen. "If you work hard, maybe you'll get a decent job at the local chemical factory one day. Maybe."

As the end credits play, I spring up from the couch and head out of the front door. I look out over our small industrial town in the North of England, lined with chimneys belching out smoke. On the laundry line our sheets hang out to dry, stained brown from the pollution. This is as far from Hollywood as it gets.

I love everything about the *Fall Guy*. He's exciting and glamorous and loves what he does. But he's also got a soft side like me.

I may not have superhuman strength like the Bionic Man, but I sense I do have a superpower. When I close my eyes, I can picture the moves of my on-screen heroes. And as I picture them, I begin to see that I can do those same moves.

This helps me to perfect my high dives, but it also helps me see a future for myself that my dad seems to think is impossible. A future as a stuntman.

The stands surrounding the dirt filled, oval arena are empty. A few simple jumping gates are arranged on the far side. It smells like sweat and manure. I sit up straight, astride a sturdy horse. I'm 18. My feet sit snugly in the stirrups. With a gentle squeeze against his ribs, we begin to walk. I jostle slightly in the saddle, pushing weight down into my heels. As we move into a trot, I picture myself speed up to a canter, then race to a full gallop. Like James Bond in *A View To A Kill*. I picture the tension on the reins, how much weight is in my heels, how light my seat is in the saddle. I see it, so I know I can do it.

I glance up at the large clock on the wall. Lunch break is almost over. I work at a school fixing computers and electronics. It's how I pay for these lessons.

A couple of years ago, I wrote to a national information bureau, and asked, "How do I become a professional stuntman?" Eventually someone wrote back and explained the process to get accredited. There's a long list of skills I have to learn before I can work professionally. Martial arts, skydiving, swimming, fencing, horseback riding, trampolining, scuba diving, and acting. So I start saving up.

Even in the evening, I thumb through the yellow pages. My finger scrolls down to find the numbers for fencing lessons. Equestrian Centers. Acting Classes. They're all so expensive. "Can I pay in installments?" I ask. Dad overhears me on the phone and bellows, "Money doesn't grow on trees, you know. It's a pipe dream son. People like us don't go in for riding and fencing." He's right. At the stable, I look around at the other students. They're solicitors, dentists, not sons of a dock worker.

But that doesn't stop me. Tonight I lie on my purple bed sheets in the darkness of my room, surrounded by posters on my bedroom wall of stuntmen jumping motorcycles and leaping out of airplanes. I mentally rehearse what I'll do over the coming days. I picture the cold breeze blow through the arena. The horse underneath me landing after a jump. The dirt kicked up by its hooves. The jingle of the reins that hang around its neck. I see my body in space. I feel how I'll balance and lean in the saddle. I see myself succeed.

It's how I approach everything on the stuntman skills list. As soon as I get the yellow belt in Judo, I focus on the orange belt. And so on, until I'm wearing the highest student belt available, 1st Kyu. No one tells me I can do this, I give myself permission. Step by step, I check the boxes. I practice until I master each skill. Just like I pictured.

GUNATILLAKE: Picturing your own future can be a very powerful skill. A simple way to start is to think of a positive quality you want to cultivate in yourself — calm, kindness, patience. I'll choose patience, you choose what calls to you. Picture yourself expressing that quality in your life. See your body moving through space with this quality. Revisit this image of yourself a few times throughout the day ahead.

RIVERS: The pilot pulls back on the throttle to kill the speed. All the plane's vibrations stop. The jump light turns from red to green. Deep breath. Calm comes over me. It's all business. I make my way to the open door of the aircraft. I smell aviation fuel. I brace my hands against the door frame. Ice cold air hits me and tries to pull me hard from the plane.

I push off and the slipstream rips me from the safety of the aircraft. I quickly accelerate to 120 mph. I feel the pressure of the wind ruffling my flight suit, pushing against my goggles. Ten thousand feet below me lies a green patchwork quilt of fields and rolling hills. Time dilates. My focus is on my body. I need to fall in a completely straight line like I'm falling down a giant tube to get promoted to the next level of training. It's another item on my list.

It requires all my concentration. Cascading into the void, I arrange myself in the correct position, my back arched, my arms and legs held wide like a huge human cross. I try to exhale slowly.

On my last jump, things didn't go well. One foot got slightly out of alignment, sending me into a fast dangerous spin. If I pull the cord while I'm spinning, then the parachute

canopy twists as it opens, and I'm dead. After I landed, an instructor pointed to my feet and said, "take your socks off and remove the tongues from your boots."

Now, as I rocket towards Earth, I feel the ice cold airflow on the tops of my exposed feet. I know where they are. I line them up. And I fall straight. A few micro adjustments change my whole trajectory. My canopy opens. My legs are flung around like a ragdoll, as I reach up to grab the steering lines. I glide down, pull the brakes, and my feet hit the ground gently.

I take a deep breath in. I'm safe. I've passed the test. I should be popping champagne. But all I can think is: another box ticked. What's next?

It's a feeling I have often these days. From the outside, my life looks full of adventure. I'm fighting at the dojo, hang-gliding from the top of cliffs, diving reefs, swashbuckling. A non-stop thrill ride. But it all just blurs into a vague collage of sports halls and airfields. Every qualification I achieve, my thoughts immediately move on to the next. The next qualification.

I don't allow myself to picture anything beyond what's right in front of me. What I need to get done today. Right now.

Cameras line the set, which is made up to look like the grim interior of a 1970s film trailer. All retro furnishings. Dark lighting. A crew member tries to lighten the mood with a joke. The assistant director calls for quiet. There's tension in the air.

Two actors stand on set. The scene we're working on depicts a sexual assault. I direct them on where to place their hands, how their bodies move, twist, react. I want to make sure no one gets hurt physically, but also emotionally. It's a tough scene. The director wants it to look authentic. It's 30 seconds on screen but takes the full afternoon to get all the details right. Take after take I fine tune the actors positions. As the violence unfolds, a tightness grows in my chest. This doesn't feel good. What am I doing here?

The director finally barks, "Scene Complete." I grab a stale sandwich from a tray and head to my car. I avoid eye contact with anyone.

On the long drive home out of North London the road is dark, mostly empty. In the moonlight, I make out hedgerows and roof lines. My hands grip the steering wheel tight. My mind feels numb. I can't stop replaying moments from the day.

GUNATILLAKE: This is something our mind does so well, replay memories from the past, and like Curtis as he drives here, it can often put an emphasis on the negative. But we can turn that pattern on its head. Instead of looking back, let's look forward. Picture something positive coming up in the near future, however small. Give yourself permission to fill this image with possibility. Training ourselves to look through a different lens.

RIVERS: Sometimes my work is all adrenaline. But often — more often than I'd like — it's coordinating violent action. Explosions. War scenes. Stabbings. I have to know how the knife catches against bone. How to land after someone punches your teeth out. Doing this kind of work is taxing, not just on my body, but on my soul.

In the glare of passing headlights, it dawns on me: I've not really added anything positive to the world today. I don't want to work on scenes like that again.

It's an unusual thought for me to have. Until now for over twenty years, I've always done whatever it takes to see myself in this profession.

I've been a stuntman for 19 years. Appeared in some of the world's biggest franchises. James Bond. Game of Thrones. Marvel movies. I make good money. I'm everything that my father and my circumstances told me I couldn't be and, yet, it's not what I imagined. I'm often out of my comfort zone. A square peg in a round hole. I'm drawn to fun and adventure mixed with teamwork and a sense of belonging. But this doesn't feel like that. At least not enough of the time. And even in the moments when it does, I forget to look around and enjoy it.

But how can I change my future now without throwing away everything I've worked for? It's scary.

I think about skydiving. About how micro-adjustments mid-fall shift my trajectory. Maybe I don't need to discard everything I've worked so hard for. Maybe I just need to re-orient a few degrees. I wonder what it might be like if I keep my drive but modify my goal.

I start to picture myself in the future, like I have countless times before. Only this time, it looks different. I see myself rehearsing stunts for a comedy show. I'm collaborating with actors, listening to their ideas and they're listening to mine. They're creative and passionate. They're in it for the love, not just the money. They care about the work, they care about me, and thrive on my input. I feel valued. We make something bright, with a positive message. I give myself permission to see a different destination, a different future at the end of all my achievements.

As the miles roll by, I snap out of my daydream. My fingers loosen on the steering wheel. My breath comes easier. I feel lighter. More present in my body. I like what I'm seeing. I smile for the first time all day.

I look out at a sea of school children, seated on the floor of this auditorium I know so well. I see the wooden floor tiles, and the heavy, flowery curtains I remember. The smell of disinfectant is still the same after all these years. It's been twenty five years since I sat in this room. The kids don't know me or what to expect in school assembly today. I've been thinking hard about what I want to say to them.

I've been introduced as a local businessman. I'm wearing a suit and extra nerdy fake eyeglasses. Once on stage, I show them pictures of me as a kid in uniform, at this same school, skinny and very unimpressive.

"When I was your age, I had dreams of being a stuntman," I say. The room breaks out in giggles. I push the glasses up my nose, feigning embarrassment. "I know, I know. People laughed at me, even my parents laughed at me." I pause. "But you know what? I didn't listen to anyone who didn't believe in me." The lights dim and the video comes on. It's a montage of my stunts — rolling cars, falling from buildings, being blown up. Me fighting James Bond. Me on a morning show talking about breaking two Guinness World records.

The lights come up, and the laughter has stopped. "I had no special talents, I was an ordinary bloke, And if I can do that," I say, pointing at the screen, "if I can achieve dreams like that, then so can you." I see that they're really listening. Now they're picturing themselves in a distant scene, doing something amazing that maybe they're too ashamed to tell their friends about. Cooking. Being an archeologist. Teaching. I say. "Picture the future you want. See yourself in that place. Break it down into smaller chunks, then work incredibly hard to make it come true." I add one more note: "Don't be afraid to make adjustments as you feel the need, because real life isn't always exactly how you picture it."

Afterwards, a line of kids snakes around the hall. One by one they come up to shake my hand. I see the dreams in their eyes. I see the potential they have. Their limitless possibilities. It reminds me that my possibilities are limitless too. I make a mental note to speak in more schools. I like the way it makes me feel. I can't hide my smile..

We can see ourselves in any future, and then we just have to do the work to make it our present.

These days, I still work in stunts, now more as a director and stunt coordinator. I seek out productions that fit my personality and I work with people who resonate with me. I help tell the stories that I want to tell. It's different from the future I envisioned standing on that diving platform all those years ago with my friends waiting below. But it's the future that I want now.

With some slight alterations, I change my whole trajectory. I'm still the fall guy. But I'm also something more.

GUNATILLAKE: Thank you Curtis.

You know, there was that moment during Curtis's skydive training that I could picture so clearly as he described it. Needing to fall in a completely straight line, with the hard lessons of a dive

gone wrong just before, he nails it. And whether it's through skydiving, martial arts, fencing or horse riding, Curtis has learned mastery over his body, its orientation, its position in space. So as we start our closing meditation together, how about we take Curtis' skill as inspiration for our own.

With eyes open or eyes closed, whatever is safest and most comfortable for you. It's ok to let go of our thinking mind just for a short while. And instead we'll drop all our awareness into the body.

The body as a whole.

Feeling the body, this animal body that we have.

Interested in how heavy or light it feels.

Aware that it is an object in space.

The body in space.

Your body in your space.

Noticing how your arms and legs are arranged.

Noticing how you know how your arms and legs are arranged.

Ok. Now give yourself permission to make any micro-adjustments you might need to feel more comfortable.

Maybe letting go of tension in your hands or face.

A shift of an arm or leg here.

A slightly different position of the head on the spine.

It's not for me to say, though.

Instead use your intuition and with awareness bright and sensitive, make the micro-adjustments that feel right, bringing as much relaxed, gentle attention to the movements — and their results — as you can.

Now letting go the need to intentionally make micro-adjustments in the body.
But still keep awareness in the body, across the whole of the body.

And see if we can notice any adjustments the body makes by itself, through its own wisdom.

It may be subtle, so subtle that you can't quite catch it this time.

But that's okay. We'll give it a go.

Listening into the body and noticing any micro-adjustments it knows it needs to do.

A big theme of Curtis' story is visualization, and during his telling I invited you to reflect on a quality that you are looking to cultivate more in yourself in the coming weeks and months.

For me it's patience. What is it for you?

And as before, let's imagine ourselves expressing that quality.

Picture it however feels right for you. There's no wrong way to do this.

You can even express your chosen quality in the body right now if you like. That can be quite fun.

Whatever it is, you already have this quality to some degree, so what we're doing is not imagining a wild fantasy, just a growth.

And by imagining, picturing, visualizing ourselves being more calm, or open, or patient or whatever, we are orienting ourselves towards that direction of growth.

What does it feel like in your visualization? What does your being more of what you want to be, feel like in the body? Can you imagine that? What micro-adjustments does the body need to make to be more like that?

So as we close off, how about we set this intention to be that little bit calmer, more patient, more generous, more whatever for the next day. Building that momentum day by day, act by act, breath by breath until you're there and it's just happened.

Thank you Curtis again, and thank you.

Be well.

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