

**Opening Words:**

We are people of all ages by Carol Meyer

*We are people of all ages*

We are people of all ages who enter this space bringing our joys and our concerns.

We come together in hope.

We greet each other warmly with our voices and our smiles.

We come together in peace.

We light the chalice to symbolize our interdependence and our unity.

We come together in harmony.

We share our growth and our aspirations.

We come together in wonder.

We share our losses and our disappointments.

We come together in sorrow.

We share our concern and our compassion.

We come together in love.

We come to this place bringing our doubts and our faith.

We come together as seekers.

We sing and pray and listen. We speak and read and dream. We think and ponder and reflect. We cry and laugh and center. We mourn and celebrate and meditate. We strive for justice and for mercy.

We come together in worship.

## **Spoken Meditation/Introduction**

From the words of Rumi, Sufi poet and mystic

*Come, come, whoever you are*

*Wonderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.*

*It doesn't matter*

*Ours is no caravan of despair*

*Come even if you have broken your vow a thousand times*

*Come, yet again, come, come.*

## **Reading – *The Junkie and the Monk* by Mike Destefano, Adapted**

This is more of a reflection than a reading. It comes from a talk that comedian Mike Destefano gave about his life for the Moth, a real life story telling program.

One day Mike was shopping at a grocery store and he started feeling odd, he started to black out. He'd experienced blackouts before, but only intentionally, only when on drugs. It made him nervous since he'd been off drugs for some time. Mike was fading in and out of consciousness, aware of the ambulance, but when he really woke up he was in the Palm Beach Gardens hospital and he has a tube in his nose, in incredible pain, couldn't move much. He found out he had pneumonia, in all the lobes of his lungs. Mike

experienced fear because it was the first time in years he was concerned for his life since his wife was at home dying of AIDS.

Mike was laying there in the hospital bed and the phone rings, his friend Jimmy called and told him that his wife was just in a car accident. Even though she was dying of AIDS, the morphine made her feel she was well enough to drive and visit him in the hospital. On the way she flipped the car. Mike thought she was dead for sure this time, so took a hold of his Buddhist rosaries as he called the prayer beads on his wrist. Mike was between religions at the time but needed something, just something because after the drugs, his friends who died, his wife dying, and all he could think about of a God who was the God of his childhood. How could he pray to that God who was responsible for all the misery that was happening to him?

Mike had these Buddhist rosaries because a couple of months before the hospitalization he went to this Buddhist temple. He read about the temple in the paper and thought he should stop by and see what they were about. He saw all these people just sitting there. no nails or blood, and they were just sitting there. Mike saw how all these people had compassion, lots of compassion. While in the temple, a sweet woman came to him and asked if he would like to meet the lama. He thought she meant an animal so he thought sure,

why not. He asked her what it was, like a sheep or something and she told him no, it was a holy person, like a priest.

When the woman told Mike the lama was a priest he was worried. He had memories of mean old childhood priests, and then he went in and met the lama. He saw a little old man who was hunched over in prayer. The lama was chanting a prayer as part of his daily practice. The woman invites Mike to sit by the lama. Mike sits on his knees, reminiscent of his catholic youth and the woman tells him no, sit comfortably. Mike sits more comfortably and the lama looks at him and can speak almost no English so mumbles “oh, West Palm Beach, thank you, thank you.”

Mike is confused and looks to the woman, and she says, oh, he’s telling you that you are in West Palm Beach and he’s thanking you for being here. The lama puts his hands out. The woman tells Mike to put his hands out, and the lama took Mike’s hands and as he did Mike felt so relaxed, as if the weight of the world was off his shoulders. The lama put his forehead out and Mike put his forehead on the lama’s and he felt the world go away. Mike began visiting the temple regularly to meditate and pray. The Buddhist prayer beads were a gift and the lama had blessed them.

So back in the hospital, while holding those beads and worrying about his wife, Mike’s mother called and told him his father had brain cancer. He was angry and figured he’d been

catholic for twenty eight years, and Buddhist for a couple of months and the peace he found in Buddhism seemed to mock the pain of the rest of his life. He just wanted to stew in his misery, so Mike took those beads off of his wrist and threw them.

A couple of weeks go by and Mike's wife goes into hospice and she passes away, and he was numb, he had no feeling. Mike was holding in all that pain because his father was going to die and Mike just had to hold on. Nine months after his wife died, Mike returned to his apartment from having been out at a movie theatre and plays the answering machine. The first message is his brother saying, "Mike, pick up the phone." The second message was the same as the first, "Mike, pick up the phone." With each message the dread he felt grew until finally the message played which said "Mike, I'm sorry to tell you this on a message but dad is gone." Mike felt as though his heart was ripped from his chest. Everyone he loved was gone. He made arrangements to fly home the next day but was determined that after his father was laid to rest he was going to kill himself. He didn't tell anyone. It wasn't a cry for help. He just wanted it to end. Mike didn't think there was anything else worth living for.

Mike got on the plane, and was excited; he was at peace because after the funeral he was going to do it. He was at peace and happy because he had an end in sight. He goes to the back of

the plane to go the bathroom, and in the back row of the plane is the lama Mike met at the Buddhist temple. The lama looks at him, and said “West Palm Beach, thank you, thank you.” The lama put out his hands and his forehead and Mike took the hands and touched foreheads. The practice is called tonglen. You see the lama prayed every day to be able to do this. The practice is about taking on the suffering of others and giving others of your own happiness. You have to have amazing karma to do this practice. The lama prayed all day for years because you need to grow your heart to the point where it is so large it can absorb the pain of others like rain on an ocean. The practice worked, and Mike decided to live.

## Sermon

There is a song that was popular when I was younger.  
It was a catchy kind of song  
with repetitive lyrics that made it memorable.

*If you want to destroy my sweater  
pull this thread as I walk away.  
Watch me unravel I'll soon be naked,  
lying on the floor, I've come undone.*

Unraveled and come undone.

Seven years ago I had one of those days.

It was a day whose memory will sit with me  
as long as I have my faculties.

NPR played on the radio as I drove along I-90  
on my way from Springfield to Syracuse.

It was a gorgeous sunny September day  
and I was on the first business trip of a new job,  
and I was unraveling and I was coming undone.

Driving on I-90 the world was unraveling,  
and I was questioning just about everything.

This was because the day happened to be September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

On NPR I listened to story after story

of the people whose lives were affected  
by the events of the previous year.  
Stories played of the women and men  
who were able to escape the towers,  
and stories of women and men who were not able to escape.

I was becoming undone as I heard their stories  
and the dam that had welled up my emotion broke  
and I had tears rolling down my face as I drove.  
You see these people had lives that mattered,  
had lives which impacted others.  
Lives of meaning and lives of purpose  
while I was wondering what was the point of my own.

When the towers came down,  
in a jingoistic mentality I applied  
and was hired as a contractor for Lockheed Martin.  
It was the part I thought I could play to support our country  
while my friends would go off to combat in foreign lands.

Less than a year went by  
and the industrial complex that supports our military  
disillusioned me.

In just the previous month to that fateful drive  
I began working for a corporation

that provided computer solutions.  
I was sitting in the buzzwords of the early part of the decade,  
with paradigm shifts  
and solution providers  
and thinking outside of the box  
while working in my cube farm  
and none of that seemed to matter as I listened to these  
stories

stories of people whose lives made real differences;  
whose lives seemed to be full of meaningful relationships,  
which I thought the right career would give me.

*Listening to these stories I realized just how wrong I was,  
and the insignificance of my own existence.*

*I wondered if I died, who besides my family  
would have any reason to mourn my passing.*

I was becoming undone as I drove,  
recognizing with every story that hundreds of miles  
and the hours of my job separated me from my college  
friends.

I realized my only local friends were my coworkers.

I was estranged from knowing people  
or from having a community.

I felt that gaping wound of meaninglessness  
and did what any good Gen Xer would do in existential  
crisis,

I googled the local Unitarian Universalist Congregation.  
I started attending.

I hadn't really attended a church as an adult before this point,  
not really understanding why I would need church,  
why I would need faith.

Then this crisis of meaning happened  
and there are few Sundays since  
where I haven't been in attendance.

You see, this congregation made me feel part of something,  
part of a community,  
part of a group who cared for me  
not because of what I did,  
or what my education was,  
but just because I was a person.

This congregation helped me realize  
what it meant to forge authentic relationships  
that tied me back together after my unravelling,  
but also tied me with others.

This congregation and my relations with the members

ended my estrangement from the world,  
and bound my life to a community.

Odd, how religion does this.

When we experience moments of tragedy and isolation,  
but afterward there are signs of hope  
and a renewal of community and relationship.

Religion gives us this hope of authentic connection  
in the face of tragedy.

The importance of relationships and community is common in  
religion,

for many Jewish public rituals, there needs to be 10 Jews  
present.

It is called a *minyan*.

A *minyan* is required for the blessings of a wedding,  
for public prayer services,  
and for the public reading of the *torah* with accompanied  
blessings.

In the Christian tradition, we find the statement in the Gospel of  
Matthew:

**18:18** “I tell you the truth,

whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven,  
and whatever you release on earth

will have been released in heaven.

**18:19** Again, I tell you the truth,

if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask,

my Father in heaven will do it for you.

**18:20** For where two or three are assembled in my name,

I am there among them.”

This is a classic excerpt,

since many Christians claim

the minimum number for a church is two or three.

It takes the relationships of people to form religion,

not just relationships with a book,

not just relationships with a higher power,

but relationships with people to form religion

From Mike Destefano’s story,

we saw a man on his road to ruin.

His wife died tragically,

his dad died,

he was on his way to self-destruction.

And a lama, a religious man

foreign to him reached out to him.

A man who wanted to share with him.

Mike was on his way to suicide

and was only brought back out of this path  
by the bonds of faithful relationship.

What brought him back was not the heart sutra.

What brought him back was not enlightenment.

What brought him back was the relationship,  
and very human connection with the Lama.

We've heard it now from Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist sources,  
but it also comes from Muslim sources.

Kahlil Gibran, Muslim mystic and poet, wrote:

*Do not seek your friends with hours to kill,  
but with hours to live.*

*Your friend can fill your need,  
but not your emptiness.*

Religious relationship can fill your need,  
but not your emptiness.

Religion can bind back the fractured self  
and provide some sort of identity.

Interestingly, the root of the word religion means to bind fast,  
to form bonds,  
to rely on.

Religion is in direct opposition

to the daily life that rends us apart,  
where our value is our ability to produce,  
to provide,  
and to be of utility.

Religion provides the binding

that connects us to each other,  
which makes real the experience of interdependence.

Yet as Unitarian Universalists,

my guess is that many of you  
have experienced the binding of religion in unhealthy ways.

The majority of our adult membership is made of converts,

and my guess is that this congregation is no different.

Many of us have experience of binding

to historic forms of oppression  
such as gender discrimination,  
of improper power imbalances  
where children are treated as less than fully human,  
where people are othered because of their sexuality.

The world is made up of forces that seem

to pull us from our best selves,  
which seek to fracture us and make us come undone.

The world has a way of unraveling us.

The answer to unhealthy ties that the world places on us  
is not complete independence,  
that will lead to loneliness, and isolation.

The answer is not accepting unhealthy dependence.  
Too many voices pull at us that way,  
pulling us apart.

Let's look at what the paths of independence and dependence  
have brought us.

According to the sociological research for the book, *Bowling  
Alone*,

In the last twenty-five years in America:  
there has been a drop of thirty-five percent in friendly home  
visits,

a forty-three percent drop in the number of family dinners,  
a fifty-eight percent drop in voluntary club attendance.

What happened to those friendly ties that linked us to one another?

What caused this fracture that pulled at our threads  
and unraveled ourselves?

This is a recent phenomena,  
of being pulled from each other  
and having our selves feel fractured.

It was not so long ago that French author, de Tocqueville,  
wrote how "Americans of all ages,

all stations in life,  
and all types of disposition are forever  
forming associations... Religious, moral,  
serious, futile, very general and very limited,  
immensely large and very minute...

Nothing, in my view,  
deserves more attention than the intellectual  
and moral associations in America.”

My own grandfather was a member of the VFW,

he was a member of the Rotary

he was at church on Sundays

he was a school volunteer once he retired

He was Irish,

but he still would participate as treasurer of the spaghetti  
dinners

of the local Italian-American Club.

Neither of my parents were participants in such organizations,

and I'm a member myself

of a local ring of the International Brotherhood of Magicians.

The meetings are populated largely

with people who could be my grandfather.

I'm probably the only member of the ring under forty.

But this isn't just some trip in nostalgia.

This isn't just a stroll through some made up good old days  
where people were committed  
where communities flourished  
since those good old days were not so good.

It is not a trip of nostalgia, because it is a real problem.

We don't have the same connections to groups or friends.

We don't have the same support structures  
for teaching us how to be.

We don't have the relationships with the neighbors anymore  
to borrow that cup of sugar  
or the lawn mower or snow blower.

Instead we have the inundation of media telling us who to be.

The movie *Fight Club* put it well.

*Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes,  
working jobs we hate  
so we can buy what we don't need.*

*We're the middle children of history, man.*

*No purpose or place.*

*We have no Great War.*

*No Great Depression.*

*Our Great War's a spiritual war...*

*our Great Depression is our lives.*

*We've all been raised on television*

*to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires,  
and movie gods, and rock stars.*

*But we won't.*

This monologue illustrates that we don't have communities  
telling us what to value,  
how to move through the stages of life.

We are taught to be who we are through marketing and media,  
instead of from the wisdom of ages.

I've worked with enough of the elderly in hospital chaplaincy  
to realize that their wisdom by and large will die with them,  
since no one else is there to hear them.  
no one else wants to hear them.

The wisdom they could offer has no outlet, no audience.  
you won't see it on dancing with the stars  
or LOST  
or even on "Wait, Wait, don't tell me."

So where will we hear the lessons  
that can offer us an alternative to the  
flood of information we get from advertising  
and marketing that points out what our life should be?

Where else will we be taught how to be happy  
besides through the smiling people in the Crate and Barrel  
ads?

That comes through congregations  
and the bonds of interdependence of right relationship.

Often the mantra is repeated,  
“I’m spiritual, but not religious”  
and I cringe.

The idea that without others I can find wellness or wholeness  
can be problematic.

I don’t want to dismiss that very real, very profound experiences  
can happen in nature  
can happen alone  
but those experiences require the context of a community  
to be understood.

Perhaps we need a lesson from the wisdom that comes from  
Africa.

Desmond Tutu developed a teaching  
that came from traditional African wisdom.

This teaching is called *Ubuntu*.

The teaching is long, but here are a few of its core elements  
Everything exists in relation.

This relationality of existence is seen in life itself.

Each person’s ideal humanity is expressed in the relation  
with others.

The person is a person through persons.

The person is a person through persons;

only through others can I come to be truly myself.

My ideal humanity,

our ideal humanity,

happens only in relation with others.

Our ideal humanity requires the generations,

the communities that offer us the wisdom

to be who we most want to be.

Our ideal humanity requires each other in ties and bonds

of healthy relationship

the kind found in communities of faith, hope, and love.

May it be so.

Amen

Benediction:

By Andrew Tripp

May Life bless you and keep you

May Love shine upon you and be gracious to you

May Light turn toward you and bring you peace

Go now knowing you are good, and knowing you are loved.

Blessed be, Amen