

**“Meaning in the Layers”**  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
January 9, 2022

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

**Readings**

“The Layers” by Stanley Kunitz<sup>1</sup>

I have walked through many lives,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray...  
In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered  
and I roamed through wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice  
directed me:  
“Live in the layers,  
not on the litter.”  
Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.  
I am not done with my changes.

“Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern

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<sup>1</sup> The full poem can be found at <https://poets.org/poem/layers>.

that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account.” John Gardner<sup>2</sup>

## **Sermon**

During the summer of 2010, I was living in Chicago and working at an area hospital as a chaplain-in-training. As I was working in a hospital, matters of life and death were all around me and were at the heart of the issues, both medical and spiritual, faced by the patients I talked to each day. Any of us who have experienced the death of a loved one or faced our own mortality up close knows how clearly and sharply death can put life into focus.

This happened for me in a surprising way that summer - not just in talking with patients in the hospital rooms where I was a chaplain, but also in my own family. I was spending the summer in my uncle’s apartment just a few blocks away from my parent’s home, the home I grew up in. One evening I received a panicked call from my mother. My father who had been having some minor health issues had become extremely weak and disoriented and my mother had called 9-1-1. My now-husband, Jared, and I arrived at their home just after the EMTs. My mother was upset and worried and my father was still confused. I rode with him in the ambulance for the short ride to the local hospital, which thankfully, was just a few blocks away.

I had felt the mortality of loved ones before - two of my aunts and my grandfather had all struggled with cancer and then died within a couple years of one another.

That evening, though, facing the fragility and mortality of my own father felt different. And, I could tell that both he and my mother were frightened.

Thankfully, after running some tests and keeping him overnight, the medical staff determined that they needed to make some adjustments to his medication and he would be fine.

That episode coupled with my time as a hospital chaplain that summer brought some key things into focus in my life. As a discerning seminary student who had not yet decided upon a set path for my ministry, it made clearer my calling to serve in a pastoral role that would keep me close to these fundamental issues of life and death - to life’s ultimate concerns. And, this was the first step to me traveling down the path towards ordination as a minister. This experience of facing the fragility of life and the closeness of death also brought into focus my relationship with my

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.pbs.org/johngardner/sections/writings\\_speech\\_1.html](https://www.pbs.org/johngardner/sections/writings_speech_1.html)

partner. Our relationship was already very serious, and the steadfastness and compassion with which he made himself present to my family in this time of need sealed the deal. We were engaged just a couple months later.

After this summer of being brought closer to death, I was able to live my life with more intention. I found myself approaching the key questions of life even more consciously and thoughtfully.

Our worship theme for the month of January is Living with Intention. It is no coincidence that this theme lines up with the start of a new year. In the new year, we often pause to make some assessment of our lives. To determine how we might begin again and make adjustments to more fully and more intentionally align with our values and our wishes for ourselves and for others.

And, this isn't just about making resolutions to impossible self-improvement schemes. Living with intention requires an awareness, a thoughtfulness, and a humility about our lives and our place in the grand scheme of it all.

Often, it is coming to grips with the realities of aging and the finitude of our lives that can bring the clarity that is at the heart of intention.

As John Gardner says, "Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something."

Life gives us the possibility of creating and finding meaning. As we grow older, of course, there is even more material to work with.

In the eleven-plus years since that hospital visit, I have become a mother. My parents have become grand-parents. We lost my spouse's father as well as a baby-to-be early in pregnancy. The layers of my own life have built upon one another as happens with the passing of time, and with it, building blocks of meaning have emerged.

In his book of poems, [Growing All the Way to Our Grave: Conscious Aging & Mindful Dying](https://tomo-t.com/growing-all-the-way-to-our-grave/),<sup>3</sup> Tom Owen-Towle puts it this way: “welcome to our fate / full time sculptors of meaning / from start to finish.”

Indeed, from start to finish and everywhere in between, we sculpt meaning of the minutes, hours, days, and years of our lives. Often, this time is filled with experiences and relationships that add richness and depth to our lives. Intimate friendships. Parenthood. Grandparent-hood. Mentorship. Sometimes, the events of life can seem senseless. The death of a child. An accident that causes lifelong disability. There are events that make us ask, why me. An unexpected cancer diagnosis. A house fire that leaves your life in shambles. And, there are experiences that inspire lifelong passions and convictions. I would dare say that the times we are living through now are full of such opportunities for meaning-making.

Thankfully, we have many guides and spiritual companions among us. One of them was Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who, as the year 2021 drew to a close, took his final breaths at the age of 90. Archbishop Tutu led a remarkable and consequential life most notably as an advocate for the end of the policy of apartheid in his country, as a leader of the truth and reconciliation process, and as a constant advocate for racial justice and equality.

Well before he was an Anglican archbishop, Desmond Tutu was a young boy living in the town of Klerksdorp, outside Johannesburg. This story from his childhood illustrates how Archbishop Tutu was a sculptor of meaning from start to finish.

One day, Desmond was riding his brand new bicycle in his neighborhood when he encountered a gang of boys. They harassed him and called him a terrible name - a racial slur. In his recounting of the story, he doesn't say what the word was but we can imagine. Of course, Desmond was very upset by this and he went to the local priest, Father Trevor, to tell him about it. He shared how angry he was and how he wanted to get revenge on the boys. Father Trevor asked him if he would ever forgive the boys and he said, never. Then, he gently told Desmond that this was the problem. “You will get them back, and then they will get you back, and then soon our whole world will be filled with nothing but ‘getting back,’” he said. Desmond encountered the boys again the next day and was full of fury. He pedaled fast and hard through the group and yelled his own angry words at them. He didn't feel better after this. In fact, he felt worse.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://tomo-t.com/growing-all-the-way-to-our-grave/>

A few days later he came across one of the boys from the group who was outside of his house with his brothers. The brothers were teasing and fighting with the boy, and Desmond felt sorry for him. When he encountered the boy again at the market a few days later, his heart had softened. The boy was standing alone and Desmond approached him. “I’m sorry for what I said,” he blurted out. The boy began to stammer, “I guess...I’m...well...” Father Trevor had told Desmond that you didn’t have to wait until someone said sorry to forgive them. Instead, we have the power to forgive whenever we are ready. Desmond remembered this and said to the boy, “I forgive you.”<sup>4</sup>

We know that Archbishop Tutu would go on to become a leading figure in the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa in the 1990s. He was a promoter of reconciliation with forgiveness at the heart of his theology and ethics.

This event in his childhood planted a seed of intention and meaning in Desmond Tutu’s life that grew and blossomed in world-altering ways.

On the day of his funeral, I was surprised to learn of the Archbishop’s final wishes.<sup>5</sup> The first was for his body to be placed in a simple, pine casket. The images of his wake and funeral show the small, for he was not a tall man, unvarnished box lying beneath the towering ceiling of St. George’s Cathedral in Cape Town.

For a person of such moral stature, the image of his humble casket was breath-taking.

Archbishop Tutu did not want an ostentatious funeral and it was, indeed, an understated affair with only one speech in addition to a sermon, limited military presence, and only 100 people in attendance due to the pandemic.

His other final wish was for his burial remains to be created through a process called aquamation. In aquamation, the body is submerged in a mixture of water and alkali which then breaks down all the tissues of the body until just the bones remain. The bones are then processed into a fine dust.

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<sup>4</sup> This story is told in the book, [Desmond and the Very Mean Word](#) (Candlewick Press).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/01/1069676008/a-plain-pine-coffin-and-eco-friendly-cremation-are-the-last-acts-of-desmond-tutu>

In addition to being an advocate for equality and a healer of the wounds of racial division, Archbishop Tutu was an environmentalist. Aquamation is 90% more energy efficient than traditional cremation and uses no fossil fuels.

Archbishop Tutu demonstrated throughout his life an intentionality in his actions and his way of being in the world right up through the final moments of his bodily presence on earth. As is true for all of us, Archbishop Tutu was shaped by the many layers of his life over the years - the life experiences, relationships, suffering, losses, and joys that made his life what it was.

When we look back on our lives, from whatever age or stage that may be, we may find a cohesive pattern, a direct path of meaning and purpose from birth to death. More likely, we look back, like Stanley Kunitz in his poem "The Layers," and we see the many lives we have lived and the milestones fading into the horizon.

And yet, we are not done with our changes. Even now, this is our fate, to sculpt meaning with the layers, until it is done.