

A Year To Care

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So I want to say some words for people who might be listening today on AudioDharma, because maybe some of you are on AudioDharma today wondering what happened, because it's not being broadcast on YouTube today. Somehow we're having trouble with streaming from the computer, and we'll work on it, and I'm sure we'll fix it. The cut of an announcement is that it just felt right to me, at least, that for the next two weeks, after tomorrow, we'll take a break from meeting in person here at AMS, just to kind of get our bearings with this new COVID situation. Then probably we'll start again in two weeks on Monday, the seventeenth, in person, my guess. But we'll see how things develop and go. I don't feel so worried myself, but maybe it's not, maybe it's from stupidity.

A little influence is that I don't want all of you to run out of here at once, but about two weeks ago, my son came home from college with Omicron. Going through that whole monitoring and learning about it was partly the motivation to close for two weeks, but also part of the reason why I'm not so worried about it. The precautions we have here are pretty good, and I think that makes it pretty safe for everyone. When we open, we might certainly request, but it may be required, that everyone also be boosted; the boosters make a big difference. My son went through it—he almost wouldn't have known he had it except he was told, and then he got tested, and he had very minor symptoms. All of us quarantined, and all of us got tested at the right time, so it's all good, apparently.

So that's kind of the announcement. For the talk, this is the last Sunday talk for this year as we get ready to welcome in a new year. I remember that in 2020, when we were brought in, because of the "20/20 vision" thing, some of us talked about it being a year of clear seeing. Maybe it was in some ways. But now I am thinking about this 2022, and I would love it if it was a year of care, a year in which we cared. It seems that is particularly important at this juncture of human history that more of us care.

It really makes a difference if we come together, all of us, to care about so many things we've learned over the last year, over the last decades, to care about that are worth caring about. Then I woke up this morning to learn that Desmond Tutu had died. He was a very inspiring person, both because of his fight against apartheid, but also because of his phenomenal work with the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa. It was so inspiring. It's one thing to set a person free from oppression like he did, which is so important. It's another thing to come out of that and try to heal the society that was so divided.

Probably South Africa wouldn't have managed so well if it hadn't been for the Truth and Reconciliation process that inspired so many people in South Africa, even people who didn't go through it formally. The proceedings they had just pointed to a different way of being together. In thinking about what I was going to talk about today, I read about his biography, and apparently he had polio as a kid, and his right hand was atrophied because he couldn't use it. Also, when he was eighteen, he spent a year and a half in hospital with tuberculosis. There was an Episcopal priest who came to visit him and became his friend, and that's what set him in motion to become a priest himself, and then become the archbishop, and then become such a big influence on South Africa. He was a great person, inspiring person.

But also we remember that there were people who cared for the inspiring people, the people who believed in them enough so that they could move forward and become someone wonderful. Perhaps, you know, there's an idea of care, emphasizing care. There is a traditional story from somewhere, the idea is from the Middle East. Some time in that time of old, there was a family that gave birth to a baby girl, and as it was, there was an old wise woman who lived at the edge of town, and she came to see this new girl that was born. She said, "Oh, she is a wonderful girl for sure, and she will die on her wedding night." Well, she grew up, and she was a wonderful person, and she got engaged, she got married.

There was a wedding, and then there was the wedding feast that evening. The parents didn't tell anybody about this prediction, but they were kind of a little bit on edge, thinking she was going to die that night. There was a big feast, everyone was partying and feasting and dancing. A poor beggar came to the door of the party, knocked, and asked to have some food. Everyone shooed the person away: "No, no, no," but the bride, of all the people in the party, was the one who went out there to give food to the beggar. The party went on, there was the wedding night, and everyone woke up the next morning and they were alive.

The parents went to find the old woman and said, "What happened? We've been living with this idea that she was going to die." The old woman said, "Oh, but there was one thing that was going to save her, and that was if she did an act of kindness on her wedding night. But

I couldn't have told you that, because then it wouldn't have worked. It wouldn't have been kind if it had been done for that purpose.” So the act of kindness that saves someone, the act of kindness that will save us, the act of care that will save us—what will we save through our care?

There's lots to care about now, as I said. Now they say that in terms of the whole climate change that's happening, it's not a matter of stopping it. Now our care can go into reducing the damage, and in some ways that makes it easier, because the idea of all or nothing is hard. But the idea that we can reduce it, that each of us can reduce it in an important way, maybe by saving one life, one animal life, anything we can do to make it better, to care. But one of the things that we save if we care is, in fact, our care. Maybe caring, compassion, kindness is one of the most important resources that we have, and it can be lost.

It can be forgotten. It can be submerged in despair. It can be lost in anger. It can be lost in all kinds of things, in distractions, in Netflix. But to care, to let that beautiful—maybe what's saved is our care, and that counts. Who knows what our care's need will be needed for?

There's another, maybe Middle Eastern, very stern story of a Sufi who some genie comes along and offers: “This is Sufi. I have one wish or two wishes, Anāya. You'll decide whether it's one or two.” So the Sufi wishes: “May I help everyone I come across, wherever I go, may I be helpful to people, but may it be that I don't know that I'm doing it.” So he's given this big burlap bag to carry that's filled with seeds of fruit trees, maybe date palms or something, and it has a little hole in the back of it. As he's carrying it on his back or his shoulder, it slowly loses these seeds out the back, but he doesn't see them falling.

He keeps walking as he wanders around his part of the world, and he doesn't see that over the weeks and months and years after him, it grows these fruit trees that benefit the people around him. So who knows? Does your care need to have proof that you've succeeded? Is it enough to care? Can you care? But sometimes we do get wonderful fruit, see the fruits of our care, and sometimes it comes back to ourselves.

Maybe this is a very trite example, but it was a little bit inspiring, because it has been our experience during retreat that everything kind of magnifies a little bit there. For those who haven't been there, we have a tea table, and under the counter there's a small little refrigerator where they have dairy milk, different kinds of milk things. One day I noticed that there was no milk there, so I went out of my way to get a brand new, unopened container, and I put it in the fridge for someone who was going to come. I didn't think about it any more. A couple of hours later I decided to have some tea and to put some milk in it, and I opened the refrigerator, and there was a full, unopened bottle of milk there. The person who benefited

was me, you know. I'd cared, you know. So it's a silly example, right? But it comes around.

I'll tell you another way it comes around that happened this week or so. My mother is now in a memory care home, is now in hospice, and so a week or two ago, as all this kind of hospice care comes into play, I received a call. I get real cold phone calls now from the hospice, you know, all kinds of issues and stuff, and the wonderful place Mission Hospice here in San Mateo. I got from twenty phone calls. This woman says, "You know, I'm the Mission Hospice chaplain, and I'm getting ready to visit your mom." That's nice. But it turns out the woman who is my mom's chaplain was introduced to becoming a chaplain by doing the Buddhist chaplaincy training that I offer here at IMC some ten years ago, eleven years ago.

She went through the training and learned about all this and said, "You know, I was supporting her. I wanted to, you know, it's a wonderful thing to train a chaplain." Some of you in the room have been in the chaplaincy programme. I can see at least three or four of you here, and so, you know, love doing it. I feel like a kind of pyramid scheme for joy, because people go out and benefit others, and then guess who benefited? It comes around. So that's nice, you know. So who knows what our care does in the world? Maybe we don't need to know, but who knows the good we can do.

There's another story of a Christian monastery someplace. The few monks that were left in the monastery were getting quite old, and no one came to visit the monastery any more, and there was no one joining the monastery. It seemed like the monastery was just dying away, and they could see that in a few years none of the monks would be left. What would happen to the monastery? It had been a thriving monastery in their youth, but now it was fading away. The abbot was a little concerned about this, of course, and so was quite perplexed. On a visit, there was said to be this very wise rabbi in the next valley over or something. So the abbot went to the rabbi and said, "You know, we have this issue at our monastery. It's dying away. No one's coming. It seems like it's coming to its end. Can you have any ideas of what we can do and what might revive it?"

They had tea and talked about things. The rabbi said, "No, not really. I don't know about monasteries." Then, as the abbot was leaving to go back home, the rabbi said, "Oh, by the way, one of your monks back at your monastery is going to be the Messiah, the next Messiah, or something." The abbot went back to the monastery, and the monks there were eager to find out what they learned. They all wanted to know advice. They asked what advice the rabbi had given. The abbot said, "Well, he had no advice for us. He didn't have anything to say, but he did say this strange thing as I was leaving. He said, 'One of us is going to be the Messiah.'"

That's strange. In the next days and weeks, the monks would look and wonder, "Well, who could it be? Well, it can't be Father Laurence. He's always so grumpy. However, he's always helping. He's always at the right place when someone needs help. He's always right there to help. Could he be? No, no, maybe. Well, maybe. But what about Brother Joseph? He's just so lazy. No one does less than him in the monastery. But whenever he does something, it's always so kind." Then they went through everyone, thinking, "Could it be that person? Could it be that person?" As they had these thoughts and recognized that each of them had something good going for them, they started treating each other with respect and care and reverence in a way that they hadn't done for a long time.

That was nice. Then one day some young people from town came to have a picnic on the monastery grounds, and they felt something, and they had little conversations with some of the monks, and they felt something special. So they came back, and they came back, and more of them came, and then some of them joined the monastery, became monks. After a couple of years, the place was thriving again with young, dedicated monastics. So care—what happens when we care for each other? We respect each other, we revere each other. What are the conditions we put in place? It doesn't take a lot of thinking to see that they are very different conditions than being indifferent. But to care, to love, to be kind, as if your care is important, as if you matter, then what you do matters.

Maybe it doesn't have to be big enough to become Desmond Tutu, but maybe it's that you cared about a neighbor, you cared about someone who has a flat tire, and you pull over to help them. I remember once in Palo Alto, someone's car was stalled in the intersection. The woman's car was stalled and she was standing there wondering what to do, and it seemed dangerous. So I got out of my car, parked my car aside, and I pushed it to the side. It sounded like a nice thing to do, it was the right thing to do, and I haven't thought about it in thirty years, but just now. So to care—who knows who we're meeting? Do you know the people you meet? Do you know who they are and what their destiny is? Do you know anybody really? Who knows? Maybe they're like Father Laurence. Maybe they're the Messiah. Maybe something special.

In 2013, some people cared for a thirteen-year-old girl who was shot. Two years later, that thirteen-year-old girl received the Nobel Peace Prize—Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan. Who would have known that the care of caring for her would have such a big impact? In 2018, a thirteen-year-old teenager started skipping school. A year later, Forbes magazine listed her as one of the hundred most powerful women in the world, and she ended up on the Time magazine persons of the year. That was Greta Thunberg. Who would have known? In 2020,

a seventeen-year-old teenager working at the mall changed America by taking the video of George Floyd dying—Darnella Frazier. Before that, there was a teenager, a girl who lived and went to thirteen different schools before she graduated high school, and then went on to be a single parent, cared for by friends, and living on food stamps. What would happen to her? She is now, currently, the US Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, a Laguna Pueblo from the Laguna Pueblo tribe. Who knows who's out there? Who knows who we meet? Who knows who you are? Some of these people were ordinary people, but who knows what comes their way.

All these things are, you know, maybe inspiring, also a little daunting when you mention such great people who do such monumental things, but maybe care. Each of them needed people who cared for them. The people who care, I think, don't have to know what the impact of their care is. Maybe care—what's important about care is the caring, without much thought about long-term impact, just let us take care, to live a life of care. So how would you live if you lived as if your life mattered? How would you live if you really thought that you could make a difference? I think our lives do matter to probably many of you. It's kind of your stereotypic idea now that, you know, in the holidays some people watch "It's a Wonderful Life." Maybe we can all be George Bailey, the man who didn't think that he'd done anything good in life and was going to jump off the bridge and commit suicide. Then the angel comes and shows him what life in the town would have been like if he hadn't lived at all, and it was awful. So here we are. We do matter, each of us, more important.

So I ended up with Kuan Yin on the altar—she's not actually been up there that I know of. It's kind of nice to have her there, especially for this talk, and care, compassion, and kindness. There's a story about Kuan Yin that sometimes she's said to have eleven heads, sometimes a thousand arms, and the story is that's how she got those eleven heads and a thousand arms. Apparently she worked tirelessly to save people, just apparently one day she had everything all tidied up, and imagined that heaven was good, and then she woke up the next morning, and sure enough, people were suffering again. It didn't take long for the suffering to come back, and then she did it again. But then the suffering came, and she saw the immense suffering of this world, that seemingly she couldn't keep up with. I guess in English I would say she was heartbroken, but her head burst—head broken—and into eleven heads and a thousand arms. So she can be even more effective and more helpful, to help the world. The thousand arms are there because each arm, each hand, has a different tool, implement, to help the world. She has all these heads to look everywhere.

I like this story, really, because some of us are afraid of having our heart broken. Maybe the

issue is, it's difficult to have your heart broken. Maybe you haven't had it broken enough. Maybe there's the art of letting it break, really break. Maybe then you'll be Kuan Yin. Your heart will break into eleven hearts. Or some people say that if your heart breaks into many pieces, it just has more surface area in order to feel and sense and be caring for this world. I don't think we should be so afraid of having our hearts broken. I think that if we can learn, maybe through the practice, we do the mindfulness practice to not resist it, not be oppressed by it, not be afraid of it, not be submerged by it, not give up because of it. There's something about caring in spite of the broken heart, something about a sense of dignity and value and presence that allows the heart to break, and something kind of to emerge from that—caring for the world, caring for others, sensitivity, love, kindness.

Maybe if your heart is broken enough, what else is there but to be kind? What's left if you do it thoroughly? The thousand arms, hands of Avalokiteśvara—I think of them also as hands that reach out and touch the whole world. It's remarkable that we live in a world now that is, you know, it's kind of also a stereotype or cliché that the world has gotten so small. But I can't help but to keep thinking that it's getting smaller and smaller in the way that what happens elsewhere in the world affects us, and what we do affects the world. There was someone apparently less than two months ago who got sick with COVID in South Africa, was discovered to have—one person discovered to have this new variant. When did I care so much about what happened to a sick person on the other side of the world? But that one person from there, maybe where it began, it spread out across the whole world, and now the whole world is pausing in a certain way from one. We have this invisible force. We don't see it with normal eyes—the virus—and it's the fact that it spreads and connects all of us all over the world. What happens in South Africa, what happens elsewhere, has a huge impact on us.

Can we just close our borders and just care for ourselves as if we can, as if that's enough? If we want to care for ourselves, I think we should care for others. It isn't just mothers going to nursing homes, having chaplains come, that we can experience how it comes back to us. But it's also if we don't care for the world, don't care for others, then what virus will confine us? I kind of love seeing people with masks on, and I'm troubled by it, of course. But my assumption is that when people wear masks, they're caring for me. Certainly when I'm wearing a mask, I'm caring for all of you. The fact that there is lived in a room full of people with care is visible. I think it's a beautiful thing, wonderful thing—love made visible, these masks.

As we care for others, a wonderful thing about COVID—wonderful, can we say? The wonderful thing about COVID is this simultaneous thing where, if we care for others, we're simultaneously caring for ourselves, kind of represented by the masks. The mask also is a way of

caring for ourselves. You're protecting yourself with the mask, and you're protecting others through the mask, and so it creates this situation where you get to have the benefits of both. You both get to benefit yourself, and benefit to care for yourself, care for others, and so you might as well get credit for both. So don't just do it for your own sake, and don't just do it for other people's sake. Do it for both. You get a lot more credit. Whoever credits this story, I don't know where it is. In your heart, I think that's where the credit is.

So, you know, it's a beautiful thing to develop, to grow this heart, to expand this heart. Sometimes by breaking it and letting it grow, it makes a difference. Your care makes a difference, makes a difference for you. It makes a difference for the world. So perhaps just like the monastery, if everyone, if we treat everyone as worthy of care, worthy of respect, worthy of reverence—everyone—it is a care that I think will return and benefit us as well, not least because it's good for our hearts. It's good for our inner lives to treat people that way, to see people that way. I think of it as myself. I think of that as the natural way of being. Anything short of that requires resistance, requires contraction, closing down, pushing away, being selfish.

So, the Year of Care. As I was thinking about this, I was thinking that some people have calculated that unless we change something, a million species of plants and animals will be extinct within the next hundred years. So what will die if we don't care? Certainly, care will die. Do you want to live in a world where there's no care? I'd rather live in a world that cares than anything else. With our care, some things will die, and one of the things that will die is our selfishness. Will that be so bad? I think it'll be liberating to do that. So, 2022, may it be the year of care, and by the end of next year you'll know whether it was a year of care. If you cared, you'll be the proof of it. May you benefit this world and in doing so yourself. Thank you.