From Stillness to Bold Action: Practicing Mature Spirituality in Troubled Times
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington
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Description: This New Year's reflection draws on the interspiritual wisdom of Brother Wayne Teasdale, who explored what it means to become a truly mature spiritual person in a fractured world. This service will weave Teasdale's elements of spiritual maturity together with Unitarian Universalist commitments to justice, compassion, and earth care. Together we will explore how contemplative practice and courageous action can deepen and sustain one another in our personal lives and in our shared public witness.

Celebrant: Marybeth Redmond is an ordained interfaith/interspiritual minister and certified spiritual director who currently serves as the director of community experience for Closer Than Breath, an online contemplative community. She has been a practitioner of Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina, yoga, and the Christian contemplative path for many years. A longtime journalist who has advocated for Vermont's most vulnerable communities, Marybeth recently served in the Vermont State Legislature.

Quote:
"Spiritual practice is to the mystical life what food and water is to the body. Just as we cannot survive very long without food and water, we cannot survive on the spiritual journey without a contemplative practice of some sort."

- Brother Wayne Teasdale,
The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions (1999)

Call to Worship:

A warm and enthusiastic welcome to all, those gathered here in the sanctuary, as

well as those joining us on the livestream. My name is Rev. Marybeth Redmond, I use she/her pronouns, and I am honored to celebrate this first service of 2026 with all of you this morning. (pause) Let us take a deep breath together and arrive more fully in mind, heart and body. (inhale-exhale)

We gather at the threshold of a new year. We arrive just as we are: perhaps weary, unsettled, alarmed, maybe searching for hope, seeking peace, and yet most importantly, still called to come together and to serve together. In the midst of unraveling systems, democratic values compromised, and growing uncertainty in our world, we take this hour to attune our hearts to a deeper current, to a current of mystical hope, to the Presence of Love planted within us and surrounding us and infusing everything, a Love that holds us and this aching world - beyond any outcome we can see.

Divine Love, Spirit of Mercy, Breath of Compassion at the heart of all religious and spiritual traditions, draw us now into a stillness that is not escape, but deeply rooted in Presence and connection.

As we breathe together, sing together, honor silence, move in unison, listen deeply, or simply pay attention, let us experience the great safety net of Love and solidarity that connects all beings; let us remember that we belong to each other; and let us be strengthened in this hour to continue weaving and reweaving the mesh of Love that holds all and lets nothing fall from its care. And so it is. Amen.

Reading:
Safety Net
By Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, *All the Honey*

This morning I woke
thinking of all the people I love
and all the people they love
and how big the net
of lovers. It felt so clear,

all those invisible ties
interwoven like silken threads
strong enough to make a mesh
that for thousands of years
has been woven and rewoven
to catch us all.
Sometimes we go on
as if we forget
about it. Believing only
in the fall. But the net
is just as real. Every day,
with every small kindness,
with every generous act,
we strengthen it. Notice,
even now, how
as the whole world
seems to be falling, it
is there for us as we
walk the day's tightrope,
how every tie matters.

Pastoral Prayer & Stillness:
When you are a visiting celebrant, you can take a few liberties with the service!! This morning, I thought we'd use our "Pastoral Prayer & Stillness" time to practice a short body prayer together. A kind of preparation for rooting ourselves more deeply and intentionally in this present moment.

My experience of modern culture is that many of us live primarily inside our heads or mental capacities. For me certainly, this landscape is comfortable, well-worn territory where I work out the machinations of my life.

Episcopal priest, writer and mystic Cynthia Bourgeault would say that of our three

human intelligences - mind, heart, and the body, or moving center – the mind is running the show to the detriment of our overall wholeness.

…that we need to bring these three centers of intelligence back into relationship and balance, so that our decisions and actions are coming from a place of integration and groundedness.

Bourgeault also says we can experience the vast expanse of the Divine in its myriad forms to the extent that we can open to and experience sensation in the body. Our ability to perceive God, Love, or the movement of the Mystery relies on our level of embodiment, our feeling into our own incarnation.

Body prayers get us out of our heads, engage the trunk and lower limbs, and open up new pathways for experiencing the Divine and our inner knowing.

Body Prayer: The Six Gestures of Prayer (repeated 4x)

1. **Being:** *(prayer position, take a centering breath)*
   "**I am here, opening, yielding, softening to what is.** I am standing in unexplainable wholeness and holiness."

2. **Bowing:** *(gentle bow in prayer)*
   "**I bow to the whole of which I am an integral part.** I acknowledge that I am standing in and am part of the mystery that is here. I bow as a gesture of surrender and emptying myself."

3. **Opening:** *(raising hands up)*
   "**Slowly I rise, opening to the chalice of my life.** I open my spiritual heart to receive divine energy and assistance. I invite my centers of awareness into relationship so that I may see clearly."

4. **Receiving:** *(crossing hands to heart)*
   "With spaciousness born of emptying, **I gather up and receive the divine**

love that is present, sensing it in the body, savoring it, tasting it."

5. **Sharing:** *(reaching hands outward, turning sideways)*
   "**I am called to share this Divine bounty with others** - beyond my control. I scatter the seeds of this mysterious Love without concern for how it is spread and multiplied."

6. **Grounding:** *(moving hands downward at one's side)*
   "**I ground this Presence in my embodied being. I am awake. I am connected. I am home**."

Sermon: From Stillness to Bold Action: Practicing Mature Spirituality in Troubled Times

This first Sunday of 2026, the community is invited to stand together exactly where life has brought us: shaken, tired, and yet still called. As a people, we have just lived through a year where "unprecedented" felt almost ordinary, as authoritarianism grew, wars spread, the climate intensified, immigration policies violated basic human rights, and a post-truth culture further frayed trust in our shared public life.

Some of us responded by throwing ourselves harder into activism and news-cycle vigilance (moi!); others by pulling back into a smaller, safer circle of family, inner life, and whatever practices we could muster to quiet our nervous systems. Many of us did both, swinging between burnt-out urgency and self-protective retreat.

What this sermon wants to explore is another way. Wayne Teasdale, an American Catholic lay monk, mystic, and interspiritual teacher who passed in 2004, insisted that, "spiritual practice is to the mystical life what food and water are to the body." Teasdale believed that without some disciplined contemplative grounding or daily spiritual practice, we cannot sustain the human journey or our service in the world over the long-term.

Mature spirituality, in his vision, is not an escape from history, but a way of standing in the very heart of it with a consciousness capable of compassion, courage, and wisdom. The question for us at the threshold of this year is not whether we will be a spiritual or humanistic people, but whether our spirituality or humanism will be deep and rooted enough to meet this moment.

Stillness, overwhelm, and mystical hope

In a time when the safety net of democratic norms and public institutions is visibly failing, it is tempting to hook our hopes entirely to concrete outcomes. Hope rises when an election goes our way or a renewable energy policy is reinstated; it plummets with the next Supreme Court decision, ICE raid, or violent video at the top of our social media feeds.

Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and contemplative whom I referenced earlier, names a different dimension she calls **mystical hope**: a hope not tied to a particular result, but rooted in "something deeper than your situation," an indwelling Presence that lives its own steady life beneath the surface of conditions.

She describes it as resting in a field of divine mercy, a "fierce, bonding love" that is already holding us and the world, whether circumstances look promising or not.

This mystical hope is not a mood we manufacture by positive thinking; it is an abiding state we grow into through repeated yielding of our attention and consent to that deeper ground.

When we practice contemplative stillness—whether through silent prayer, meditation, mindful breathing, chant, forest bathing or simple awareness—we are not escaping the world but dropping into an inner well-spring that can nourish our outer engagement.

Without this rooting, Bourgeault says, our activism easily becomes brittle, fueled

by outrage and fear. With this rooting, our courage can be fierce but not frantic; our grief can be great but not annihilating.

Teasdale's nine elements: a map of mature spirituality

Brother Wayne Teasdale tried to describe how this inner rooting grows into a whole way of life. A leading voice for interreligious dialogue and "interspirituality," Teasdale identified nine elements of a mature, universal spirituality.

These elements are not steps on a ladder but facets of one movement of love, rooted in silence and reaching into public life. Several of them speak directly to the tension between stillness and action.

The first element is **actualized moral capacity**: being ethical by second nature, so that justice is not something we periodically remember but a reflex woven into our choices. In Unitarian Universalist language, it is moving from merely affirming principles on paper to embodying them in how we spend money, time, and attention.

A second element is **solidarity with the Earth and all beings**, a joyful sense of interdependence that experiences the suffering of other peoples, species, and ecosystems not as distant "issues" but as pain in our own larger body. This is a contemplative perception: the more deeply we rest in the One, the less convincing the illusion of separateness becomes.

Teasdale also names **deep nonviolence** as essential—a nonviolence that runs through speech, thought, and institutional life, not just protests and policies. Genuine nonviolence, he argues, is not only a strategy but the fruit of inner transformation, a rewiring of perception and desire so that we no longer need enemies to know who we are.

Closely linked is **humility of heart**: a clear self-honesty and refusal to manipulate others, born of ongoing self-knowledge and prayer. Humility in this sense aligns

well with UU practices of shared leadership and listening across difference, because it loosens the ego's insistence on being right or better than.

Several of Teasdale's elements focus directly on inner practice. **Spiritual practice**, he says, is the cutting edge of inner realization; without a committed discipline, the rest of our aspirations remain fragile. The form can vary, but the regular return to practice is what slowly shifts our center of gravity from reactivity to presence.

Mature self-knowledge grows alongside practice: an honest awareness of our motives, wounds, projections, and shadow patterns that might otherwise sabotage our activism or relationships. In Teasdale's view, inner work is not a distraction from justice; it is part of it, so that we do not unconsciously reproduce domination in our organizing or caregiving.

Then there is **simplicity of life**, a decluttering of possessions, schedules, and consumption so love can flow more freely through our days. Easier said than done, I know! Simplicity frees attention and energy for service and community.

Finally, Teasdale speaks of **love in action**—compassionate service—and **prophetic voice or witness**: the willingness to "stick one's neck out for justice," to risk comfort or reputation in solidarity with the vulnerable. In his view, spirituality that does not engage suffering in concrete ways is "poor indeed," while engaged spirituality can transform individuals, communities, and systems.

My own spiritual practice

My own daily spiritual practice developed during a breast cancer crisis 5-1/2 years ago. I was serving in the Vermont Legislature on the House Human Services Committee, the committee of jurisdiction for the COVID public health crisis. Needless to say, my days were like living at the end of a fire hose.

Into my treatment, I reconnected with the practice of Centering Prayer, a method of Christian meditation. Resting in the silence, learning to unhook from the monkey mind, and opening to deeper levels of sensation in the body created

some profound changes in my nervous system. Over time, the practice helped me regulate emotionally, find deeper clarity within, tolerate more difference, and grow self-compassion.

This 20-minute contemplative practice became a mainstay of my days, a non-negotiable, an orientation point for everything else. The “right next steps” in my social justice and activism work began to flow from this deep grounding in Source through meditation. Centering Prayer helped me to know “what was mine to do.” (I am thankfully free of cancer and in good health.)

The safety net: every tie matters

Poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer offers an image that beautifully holds this contemplative-activist balance. In “Safety Net,” she imagines waking up thinking of all the people she loves, and all the people they love, and suddenly seeing the vast, invisible mesh of affection and care connecting us.

She writes of those “silken threads / strong enough to make a mesh / that for thousands of years / has been woven and rewoven / to catch us all,” and reminds us that although we often act as if only the fall is real, the net is just as real—and strengthened “with every small kindness, with every generous act.”

This poem can be heard as a description of both grace and responsibility. The safety net of love and solidarity does not erase suffering or prevent us from ever falling; instead, it ensures that no one falls alone, and that our shared life keeps stretching to hold those on the margins.

The mystical dimension is that this invisible net or web is not only human: it is woven through with the Presence that Bourgeault calls “Mercy” and that Teasdale would recognize as the “mystic heart” within all traditions. Our contemplative practice helps us feel that net from the inside, within our bones; our bold action is how we become visible strands in it for others.

Stillness and bold action: integrating the poles

So, what might it look like, in the year ahead, to live from the contemplative center Teasdale describes, while also showing up boldly in public life?

Mature spirituality holds both contemplation and action in a tender dance: it lets the heart be broken open in stillness or prayer and then brings that tenderness to the streets, the school boards, the homeless shelters, the organizing meetings.

For Teasdale, the nine elements are one way of naming this integration. Actualized moral capacity and prophetic voice show up in how we vote, organize, and stand up with our bodies.

Solidarity with all beings and simple living shape our economic and ecological choices, from energy usage to what we buy, consume, and discard.

Deep nonviolence and humility of heart reshape our speech on social media, our participation in congregational conflict, our listening across political divides.

Spiritual practice and mature self-knowledge make it possible to experience strong emotions—anger, grief, fear—without becoming them, so that our resistance can be fierce but not fueled by hatred.

A UU-shaped interspiritual path

Wayne Teasdale coined the term “interspirituality.” By it he meant, the shared wisdom at the heart of the world’s spiritual and religious traditions. He did not envision a bland homogenization, but a deep mutual enrichment in which each path contributes its disciplines of compassion, contemplation, and justice, and practitioners are free to draw from multiple wells of religious and spiritual wisdom.

Unitarian Universalism is uniquely positioned to live out this interspiritual vision, weaving practices from varied traditions into a coherent ethical life.

In a UU setting, this might mean finding stillness through Tibetan Buddhist meditation or observing Shabbat weekly, or by chanting Kirtan or the Christian psalms, or through body-based practices like the one we did together this morning, or by communing with the trees in your neighborhood.

The test of these embodied spiritual practices is whether they grow Teasdale's elements in us: more clarity, more integrity, more solidarity, more simplicity, more love in action, more courage to speak truth with compassion.

When a congregation consciously tends this contemplative-activist ecology, it becomes what Teasdale and others have called a, quote, "laboratory of the future," a place where the next stage of human consciousness is quietly practiced and contributes to evolution of the whole.

A threefold invitation for 2026

As this new year begins, the invitation is not to do everything, but to make a clear, realistic, Spirit-led shift in how we live.

One simple approach, echoing Teasdale's elements, could be this: choose one contemplative commitment, one act of solidarity, and one step of simplification.

A contemplative commitment might be 10 minutes of silence each morning, a weekly nature walk in attentive presence, or a regular metta-loving-kindness practice for oneself and the wider world.

An act of solidarity might be joining or deepening involvement with a justice team, accompanying an immigrant-neighbor to a hearing, mentoring a vulnerable youth, or participating in mutual aid.

A step of simplification could be shifting a consumption habit, reducing online shopping, calendaring more rest into a frenetic work week, or setting a technology boundary that frees up space for more relationship and service.

The point is not to perfect ourselves but to align, little by little, with the deeper current of mystical hope and mercy that is already flowing. As the poem “Safety Net” reminds us, every tie matters; every small kindness and generous act strengthens the mesh that can catch us and others when we fall.

From stillness to bold action, from contemplative rooting to prophetic witness, may this community in 2026 grow into the mature spirituality our troubled times are asking of us.

Benediction:
We call upon the Mystic Heart embedded within each one here and enveloping all of creation. Bless us as we go forth from this gathering into worlds of disorientation and chaos, connection and peace. May the practices we choose—our moments of silence, our walks in nature, our songs and prayers and mindful breaths—steady us in compassion, deepen our courage, and grow in us a moral reflex for justice, nonviolence, and joyful solidarity with the Earth and all beings.

As we step into the days ahead, may each of us claim one contemplative commitment, one act of solidarity, and one step toward simplicity, trusting that every tie matters. May we become living strands in the vast web of mercy, our lives a quiet yet bold witness to the Love that holds all things. And so it is. Amen.