

Anthony Comegna ([00:19](#)):

This week and next, folks, we have something really, truly special for you. In fact, or at least according to one very highly respected opinion, we're going to be sharing one of the greatest cultural gifts our world has to offer. If you're like me, you first heard the word "ubuntu" in reference to the open source operating system. But if you're like our guest, Mungi Ngomane, you've been living with, by, and through it your entire life.

Anthony Comegna ([00:51](#)):

Most Sub-Saharan African countries seem to have a word or a phrase for it, and it roughly translated means, "I am because you are." A gorgeous and daringly compassionate trumpet blasts for everything organizations like the IHS stand for. I don't want to say much more now, except that no less than Desmond Tutu has declared ubuntu Africa's gift to the world. And I very much think that by the end of these interviews, you will agree.

Anthony Comegna ([01:25](#)):

Mungi Ngomane has an MA in international studies and diplomacy from the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies. She is, as you'll hear quite a bit, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's granddaughter, and regularly works with and patronizes the Tutu Foundation UK, which works to spread the principles of ubuntu throughout that country's most divided and antagonistic communities, bringing them together for peace and prosperity by sharing with them Africa's gift to the world.

Anthony Comegna ([01:59](#)):

Okay. Well, thank you so much. Thank you so much for being here. This is really, really exciting to me because I absolutely loved this book. It was so wonderful to read, especially right now when all of us are locked in our homes very worried about the state of the world and where things are going and how we should respond to it and all the innumerable details that that people can get hung up on. This was such a delight, to read a book that really makes you feel genuinely uplifted while you're going through it and by the time you finished. It was just a fantastic change of pace from some of the things that I'm usually reading for podcast prep, which is not nearly so hopeful.

Anthony Comegna ([02:46](#)):

We're even afraid of every individual contact we have with people right now, and yet all of us feel that we very desperately need that exact same contact. So I'd really like to just spend the bulk of our time here introducing what at least seems on the face of it, like a fairly simple concept, but once you start digging into it, there's so much here. There's so many layers to this idea of ubuntu. And I wonder, could you just give us a preview of what is this concept? Where did it come from? And why, as your grandfather, Archbishop Tutu put it, this is Africa's gift to the world?

Mungi Ngomane ([03:26](#)):

Definitely. I mean, to put it into one sentence and make it really easy for people to grasp is I think it's a way of life. And with that, it's a philosophy on how to live life better together, because life is about interactions and we are all interconnected. And I think obviously, it's taken COVID for us to finally realize how interconnected we are, unfortunately. But it's easily described by the proverb [foreign language 00:00:03:57], which means a person as a person through other persons. And so, I am nothing without my relations to other people. To put it to sort of granular level, I mean, none of us have birthed

ourselves in the beginning, none of us fed ourselves, so it's about remembering that we're not the individual. We're all of the people who have brought us to where we are now and the connections that we've made along the way, whether that's parents, teachers, friends, even your favorite barista that you probably aren't seeing right now.

Mungi Ngomane ([04:30](#)):

And I think my grandfather said it really nicely when he said that, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours." We say it's Southern African but I don't think that we can just claim it on that part of the continent. I think it's probably all over the continent, but there are definitely examples on the southern part from different countries of different words that were used in Malawi, to South Africa, to Zimbabwe, just to talk about the importance of people in their communities and that the person was nothing without their community.

Mungi Ngomane ([05:08](#)):

And I definitely think it's clearly an ancient term. People always ask me to pinpoint a time to where it came from and all I can say is it's ancient, long before you and I were even thoughts in our parents' minds. And I think that you still see it in everyday life in South Africa, at least I do. It's not necessarily the way that we would think people doing these big gestures. I think it probably is difficult to grasp for foreigners, but examples of where I see it in South Africa is the way that we treat our elders and the way that we enter rooms. And so sometimes it's actually annoying to me that when you go to someone's home, there could be a room full of adults and my mother will make me go around the room greeting every single person. And if you don't know people, you're like, "Oh, do I really have to go introduce myself to every single person?" But I think that's an example of ubuntu. It's like you're saying hello and acknowledging their existence and their humanity.

Mungi Ngomane ([06:19](#)):

And I think that's a nice thing to have it. I enjoy going back to South Africa and learning more and more about my culture each time. I mean, I was raised mostly in the U.S. and my mother definitely made it a point to raise us as children that were African even though we were here and to bring things from home to make sure that we remembered what our heritage was. So now it's come to fruition in my adulthood where not only is there the book, and to my mother's chagrin, I also have a tattoo of ubuntu on my wrist. But it's something that I use to lead my life because I'm not religious. I come from a family of way too many priests, and unfortunately for them, I'm not a religious person, but I think ubuntu is something that people who are either not spiritual or spiritual, and then the same for religion, can take and use as a guide. It's not supposed to be prescriptive. It's just supposed to be a way of life that makes you think more of how you carry yourself and how you interact with people.

Anthony Comegna ([07:31](#)):

That makes me think of the one anecdote you have in there about children walking into a store, a particular store. And usually, when children go into a store, nobody pays attention to them, nobody much gives them any care or concern as customers. And yet there was this one particular shop where as soon as every single person walked in, including children, of whatever age, they were greeted and recognized as an individual, somebody who is likely or possible to contribute to that store's wellbeing and that shopkeeper's wellbeing. And that really made the store sort of a hotspot for young people in town.

Mungi Ngomane ([08:13](#)):

Yeah, the butcher shop that my mom used to visit in the township they lived. It's examples like that, and also one that stuck out to me as I've lived in the U.S. and I've lived in the UK, and in public transport we have those signs telling people to get up for the elderly or someone that's pregnant and it's always just boggled my mind that there was a need for that sign. And it wasn't until starting to write this book and talking more to family that I realized it was just because I... To me, it was just a no-brainer. This would also be a no-brainer in South Africa. Of course you would get up for the elderly to sit down or for someone that was pregnant. I mean, that is just human decency, so why would there need to be a sign telling you that? And so, yeah, I think examples like that in the butcher shop are ubuntu just personified.

Anthony Comegna ([09:08](#)):

And before we get too much back into the concept itself and breaking down all the chapters you have here, I wonder, could you tell us a little bit about maybe your relationship with religion in your family? How does your family manage to practice ubuntu and yet deal with your religiousness or your religiosities, right, but your lack of religion?

Mungi Ngomane ([09:35](#)):

I don't necessarily think it's a problem probably for a few reasons. My grandfather will tease and call me a heathen, but I think I'm sort of respectful with it in the way that you could probably call me a cultural Anglican, because if my mother is doing a sermon at her church, then I'm more than happy to go listen. She's an amazing speaker and of course I want to be there in the congregation listening. When we were younger, holidays with the family, we would have Eucharist every morning. I'm sure you can imagine that a nine-year-old or 10-year-old does not want to go to Eucharist every morning while they're at Disney World or on a Disney cruise. But those are things that we did, which may be why now I'm like, "Ah, I'm okay. I think God can find me where I am."

Mungi Ngomane ([10:31](#)):

But I think that ubuntu has a connection to religion in that it's about compassion and humanity and religion is about love. And it's the same things, compassion and humanity. There just isn't this prescriptive aspect to ubuntu, where I don't think I would ever tell someone they were practicing it incorrectly because I think from day to day, it looks different for me just myself, so of course it will look different from someone else. And I don't want it to be something where people feel like they have to follow certain rules. If you are going into it with the best intentions, then I think that you're doing your best. So I don't know if there's necessarily something to say about them dealing with me not being religious. I think it's probably us respecting each other on both sides and showing ubuntu towards each other.

Mungi Ngomane ([11:30](#)):

I think that people who have heard of it prior to the book knew it mostly from my grandfather and so it came off as a very religious philosophy. And I think that the book has probably helped make it less so and let people who aren't religious know that, "This is something you can come to as well and use in your life."

Anthony Comegna ([11:51](#)):

Now, if any listeners out there are like me, they probably first encountered the word ubuntu as an open source operating system.

Mungi Ngomane ([12:00](#)):

Yes, I too. I Googled that when I was younger and was so confused by that.

Anthony Comegna ([12:06](#)):

Yeah. But now, so correct me if I'm wrong, but it's a Xhosa word from South Africa, but there are different variations in cognates all around the continent. I wonder if you could say a little bit about how the word itself differs from context to context and maybe how the practice differs too.

Mungi Ngomane ([12:26](#)):

So yes, it's a Xhosa but also Zulu word. They're very closely connected, and it basically means like man human, which is a very simple way to explain it. It's about our humanness and our connection. But it's also seen in Malawi, and I cannot remember the exact term, maybe you could let me know, where in Malawi and Zimbabwe, it is not exactly ubuntu as I've spoken about it from South Africa, but it returns back to humans and people in their villages and their communities being interconnected. Does that sort of answer your question?

Anthony Comegna ([13:16](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I mean, it seems like the concept is fairly widespread, at least across Sub-Saharan, and that might be another followup question I have is, is ubuntu popular all around the continent or is it more specific to Sub-Saharan and the Bantu languages?

Mungi Ngomane ([13:35](#)):

So definitely Sub-Saharan Africa, but I think that it's probably popular in the continent, just not that word. I think that when I look at the world and certain leaders, I would say, "Oh, they definitely have ubuntu," even if that person didn't know what the word was in their life or at the time. I did a speech once to some school kids and I spoke about Martin Luther King and I think the things about him where he was known as a great orator, but his friends also spoke about how he was a great listener. And listening is definitely one of the lessons in the book and about ubuntu. And I said he was actually a person who had ubuntu within him, even if he didn't know it. So I think that applies to the rest of the continent in the way that several African countries marry each other and how people interact and run their countries and run their families in their homes. It may not be the word ubuntu, but there's some sort of philosophy of how we lead our lives, and I think that is probably throughout the continent.

Anthony Comegna ([14:45](#)):

And now having read through this, I was of course, picking out, "Oh, well, I don't do this. I don't do, I don't do this enough. I'm not good at that." I directly contradict all of this whole chapter, and it really is, it seems like a challenge, a really hard challenge to consistently practice this way of life every day or every week, every month, even to have a little bit of it in your life. Maybe you could talk to us a bit about how it can be a struggle.

Mungi Ngomane ([15:19](#)):

Definitely. I mean, I was interviewed in the Netherlands last year and someone asked me, "Well, do you think that this is actually a naive concept? Because it sounds all fluffy and nice, and could we all do this, how lovely?" And I said I don't think it's naive. I think it's actually a pretty tough concept and that's why it's easy to dismiss it. But you're completely right, the things that are written in there, we do not do on a daily basis. I don't even do it. I like to tell people I'm a student of ubuntu. I'm nowhere near the patience level of my grandfather or my mother, and I'm still learning as I go. But I think it's being able to feel comfortable in the learning and to acknowledge that you will make mistakes and to be kind to yourself.

Mungi Ngomane ([16:15](#)):

My favorite chapter or lesson is I think less than five, "Have dignity and respect for yourself and others." And that is one that I think goes directly to how your practice ubuntu. It's about being kind to yourself in this challenge of practicing it every day, and you will make mistakes, we're only human. And of course there are some things some days where I just want to rant about something, but is that using my energy in the best way? Am I going to get the outcome I want by doing that? Or is there some other way where I could take a step back and put myself in that person's shoes and see, does this have anything to do with me? Are they uneducated about what this topic is? Giving yourself options and giving someone else options to figure out a way to move forward instead of the usual human nature of jumping to conclusions. But I don't think you should be going through it and checking out things that you don't do. That definitely is not the way to have dignity and respect for yourself.

Anthony Comegna ([17:22](#)):

Well, that might have been the chapter that I felt most short on then.

Mungi Ngomane ([17:26](#)):

I think we all do it. You're not alone there.

Anthony Comegna ([17:32](#)):

I do. I love the way that it's set up. I love that you have it divided into lessons. Each chapter is a different lesson that you take to be central to practicing ubuntu. And I think it's really great because you could almost pick this up. I didn't, since I had to prepare for a podcast, but I think, how great it would be to just pick this up every day, read a new chapter and just spend some time in your day thinking about it and trying to put that one lesson into a little more practice.

Mungi Ngomane ([18:02](#)):

And that's exactly what we wanted. We wanted it to be something that was practical that people could just pick up if there was a specific lesson they had read before and they wanted to return to or something they wanted to look at. And then when you're done, put it down on your desk or your coffee table, and again, pick it up whenever you feel. And we wanted the lessons to be grounded in South Africa because obviously this is where I've learned all that I know about ubuntu. And the South African examples make it easier for people to see that this has happened, I think. We share a handful of stories from different people who are implementing ubuntu in their lives or speak about people who've implemented it.

Mungi Ngomane ([18:50](#)):

But then, when you're saying all these nice things that people should do to have ubuntu, it's kind of hard when there's not a real life example of it happening on a grander scale. And so I think that's why we thought it was best to ground it in these examples of South Africa after apartheid, even during apartheid and how the nation and people individually dealt with this and how ubuntu was, for a lot of people, at the forefront of their minds to make it easier. Because then you can say, "Well, this is not as bad as what's happened to someone else. Maybe I should find the strength, or I can find the strength in this person's story to respond in a similar way to my situation."

Mungi Ngomane ([19:37](#)):

And of course, that's not possible in all situations, but I think it lends people a bit more time to work on how we respond to things. When we usually think, "Oh, this is the worst thing to happen to me," and you know something worse has probably happened to someone else.

Anthony Comegna ([19:56](#)):

I got to spend a minute here to gush a little bit because the other thing I absolutely loved about this book is that it is probably the most beautiful book I own now. It's just completely gorgeous. It's concise, it has this beautiful hard cover, and like you said, it has South African motifs and imagery all through it and it's just flowing with colors and wonderful illustrations and patterns. It's just gorgeous. And it really transports you into the mindset so much better.

Mungi Ngomane ([20:29](#)):

Thank you. Yes. I mean, I think that it's a cute little gift from home, you know? The cute pictures of animals and the beautiful red and gold is lovely. I have some copies on one of my bookshelves and I enjoy looking at it and I keep one on my desk for when I'm doing work or interviews of this type to inspire me and motivate me to keep going.

Anthony Comegna ([21:00](#)):

So I wonder then, maybe you can tell us a little bit more about some of the lessons in here that you either think are most important for people to hear about right now or that were just your favorites to write.

Mungi Ngomane ([21:14](#)):

So I think I'll go back to definitely lesson five, is maybe not my favorite to write, but definitely one that I've been using a lot lately. I think that we are often our worst and toughest critics and the things that we say to ourselves really stick and we don't spend enough time thinking about how we speak to ourselves. It's mostly outward. How are we speaking to others? How are we interacting with others? And I think lesson five, have dignity and respect for yourself and others is about, yes, it's not about necessarily going anywhere because ubuntu is about your relationship with everyone. But it's about making sure that you have the sort of grounding in yourself and respect for yourself where you recognize that you are worthy being of infinite value and worth. And if you recognize that, I think it's easier to recognize that in other people. That's definitely the lesson that I like to speak about when I go speak to children, because I think we throw so many conflicting messages at them.

Mungi Ngomane ([22:22](#)):

And the one thing I'd like them to take away is that, no matter what, they are of infinite value and worth and nobody can take that away from them. That is something that is just not debatable. But the other lessons, I think probably this may not surprise you, the power of the F word, forgiveness is one that is tough because I don't want to again, be prescriptive and tell people how they're meant to be in their lives and I don't want to be teaching lessons on forgiveness when there's so much involved in forgiveness. I think we often discuss forgiveness and make it seem like this thing that you need to bestow upon others, but we don't necessarily discuss the power structures that come into this.

Mungi Ngomane ([23:14](#)):

I think, especially in the U.S., I feel that it's often women are being asked to forgive for something or people of color are asked to forgive for things without people necessarily showing remorse. There's always some sort of excuse for why this has happened and, "We will do better next time," but is there actual work being done? And so I think forgiveness was an important topic to write about because obviously the South African example was amazing, but when people apply it, that's one thing I worry about, is how people apply these lessons in their lives. And I don't want it to ever come off like I'm not aware of the complexities of our individual situations. So I think that was probably... It was a tough chapter to write, but I think tough things are also important.

Mungi Ngomane ([24:08](#)):

And so at the end, once it was done, I was happy. I didn't enjoy the process but I enjoyed that it was done. And then I think right now an important lesson is choosing hope over optimism, and I think that's just a very simple thing for people to understand, is we don't know when we're going to get back to a little bit more normal. I don't think life will ever go back to normal, and was normal good for everyone? Definitely not. But I think it's about choosing hope and using gratitude to keep your wits and your spirits about you. Like, yes, there are situations right now where it just looks unfathomable of how your life will continue, people who can't pay rent, people who can't find homes, grocery stores being cleared out. And down to the granular level, I don't know how we're meant to come to terms with all this.

Mungi Ngomane ([25:21](#)):

But I think if we focus on the things that are good in our lives, it makes it a little easier to get to the next step of how we can move forward and what we need to do to get to a state where we feel like, "Okay, this is manageable and I can do this until the country opens up or whatever is appropriate for us moving forward."

Anthony Comegna ([25:49](#)):

One of the sort of consistent themes throughout the book here is that the individual by themselves is not enough, not enough to find happiness, not enough to accomplish their goals and that we really need to, as the lessons put it, see ourselves in other people and recognize that strength lies in unity and that we should put ourselves in the shoes of others, et cetera, et cetera. And I'm wondering if you could maybe just comment, given that most of our audience are probably fierce individualists like myself. I want you to comment a bit about how ubuntu either tracks with individualism or might challenge it.

Mungi Ngomane ([26:30](#)):

So I think the 100% challenge is that I think one of the things I wrote about in the book was about, this term self-made anything, self-made millionaire, self-made billionaire, that really just turns me off because, A, the people that we read about that are self-made anything, we see the health that they

have gotten, even if they're not very open about it, we can pinpoint where this help came from. And I don't know if this is just a personal thing, but I can't imagine me saying that I was a self-made anything because of the people who were so involved in my life. My mother helped me every day with this book, my grandfather, on a grand scale teaching others about ubuntu and being willing to go against the apartheid government and then going forward and running the TRC, it's just unimaginable that I could say, "Oh, this book is just from me."

Mungi Ngomane ([27:35](#)):

Yes, it has my name on it, which is nice for me. But there were just so many hands and so much help that went into it that I don't think that individualism necessarily was the best thing before. And clearly, it is not now because we need each other. We need our healthcare workers, we need our delivery drivers, we need the people working in grocery stores and the people who are protesting on the streets for their freedom. It's so insular to me to think that your concerns are the only thing that matter, because it can be harmful to people. I think being able to take a step back and put yourself in the shoes of others is not always the nicest thing to do.

Mungi Ngomane ([28:30](#)):

It's definitely difficult when someone is a stranger and you don't know them, but just think of the differences we could make if we weren't out wasting our energy protesting about the country reopening and we were focusing on what needs to actually be done to flatten this curve and make sure that people who have compromised immune systems are taken care of, and that the people who are actually out on the front lines allowing us to still get our groceries and our health care workers are provided for and made to feel safe and important. I think that, yes, it's this feeling of, "Oh, this is nice and fuzzy," but I think that those sorts of feelings do go a long way in people being willing to continue to put their lives at risk for us, and also just keeping us safe generally.

Mungi Ngomane ([29:24](#)):

So I don't think that individualism is a bad thing. I think I'm probably a very not individualistic person, but I'm very strong-willed and will do what I want, when I want. But I do also recognize the important of those in my life and those around me. So I think there's some sort of balance that needs to be had. You need to have the strength of an individualist who has done work on themselves and then goes out into the world and shares their dignity with others.

Anthony Comegna ([30:11](#)):

To close us out on this first interview, I simply have to thank our show's producer, Sean Parker, who clued me into this book, suggested and set up the interview, and in the process gave me a truly profound experience. Weird as it is to say, I feel like this book has really changed my life already, and I absolutely cannot wait to give it a second reading. It's a tough time for us all right now, and sometimes the sense of powerlessness, isolation, and even terrible sadness for the state of our world can be truly overwhelming. Whatever happens, I will be forever grateful that I have this book on my shelf, that it's always there to bring me joy, comfort, and hope for a better tomorrow. It starts with each of us, after all, step-by-step, and Everyday ubuntu is a wonderful cure for whatever ails you. And through you, all of us.