



Mary Amato, author of *Open Mic Night at Westminster Cemetery*

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The microphone is on and it's your turn. You thought you'd feel a few butterflies in your stomach, but it's more like a flock of pterodactyls. If you've ever signed up for an open mic, you know what I'm talking about. You bare your soul when you sing alone. People see the vulnerable you, the private you, the real you.

I loved writing songs, but the thought of a solo performance terrified me for years. If I made a mistake, the spotlight would be on me alone. I thought I could build courage by practicing. The problem was that I made mistakes every time I practiced. "Stay home," the demon in my head said. "You're just not good enough." Then I heard an ancient story that gave me what I needed.

I learned the story from Tara Brach, a writer, psychologist, and Buddhist teacher, and it goes like this. The demon god Mara was known for bringing fears and doubts to the minds of his unfortunate targets; and so, whenever Mara would appear in the path of the Buddha, the Buddha's loyal attendant Ananda would

panic. "Mara is here! Mara is here!" Ananda would exclaim. But instead of worrying or hiding or running or fighting or pretending not to see the demon, the Buddha would turn toward Mara and says, "I see you, Mara. Come have tea."

That story inspired me to sign up for my first solo open mic when I was in my early forties. As I stepped up to the mic, I imagined Mara in the audience. "Ha. You're going to make a mistake," Mara called out to me. "Yes, I will," I said. "So, just sit back and have a cup of tea because I'm going to sing anyway." And I did.