

**High Plains Church, UU
UI Topics**



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Notes:

Topics 1-33 are by Mike Morran, Peg Green, or the source is unknown.

Topics 34 and following are by Matthew Johnson-Doyle, unless otherwise noted.

Groups should begin with Topic 0, then Topic 1. Topic 42 should be used once a year, and topic 45 whenever a person joins or leaves a group.

U& I Group In-Gathering

Opening Words

*I am – the power of self-knowledge
I think – the power to investigate
I know – the power to master facts
I feel – the power to appreciate, to value, to love
I wonder – the spirit of reverence, curiosity, worship
I see – the power of insight, imagination, vision
I believe – the power of adventurous faith
I can – the power to act and the skill to accomplish
I ought – the power of conscience, the moral imperative
I will – will power, loyalty to duty, consecration
I serve – the power to be useful, devotion to a cause.
~ George Walter Fiske*

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

As we enter this new year and grapple with various transitions, let us take this time to re-examine our focus and direction. Knowing what each of us hopes to gain from the group will provide focus and direction, which will influence our interaction and drive our efforts so that we may meet our needs.

Focus Questions

What do you hope to gain from the group?
What are your hopes for the group?
What do you bring to the group?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words:

*We are changed, you and I
Just as before, countless times
In cycles that never quite repeat,
We are changed.*

*But this time is different.
For we have shared the sacred gift
Of knowing one another,
Of trusting one another.*

*So I say to you:
Go forth boldly
You are not alone
You carry with you a part of all of us.
Go in Peace*

U& I Group Topic 1 Timelines

Opening Words

*We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the circle of each other's arms,
And the larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance,
And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of love, who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.*
~ Wendell Berry

Check-in/Sharing

Topic/Activity (Materials: appropriate paper & crayons or colored pencils)

Create a religious timeline. Divide a line into sections, one for each of your decades of life, plus the decades you expect to live. Draw pictures for each decade representing how you understood God or felt about religion during each of those periods, plus how you hope to experience your religious life in the decades to come (20 minutes). Then share.

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*Take courage friends.
The way is often hard, the path is never clear,
and the stakes are high.
Take courage.
For deep down, there is another truth.
You are not alone.*
~ Wayne Arnason

Opening Words

*A fire-mist and a planet, a crystal and a cell,
a jelly-fish and a saurian, and caves where cave-men dwell;
then a sense of law and beauty, and a face turned from the sod,
- some call it Evolution, and others call it God.*

~ William H. Carruth

Check in/Sharing

Topic

There is a small bulletin board in my study. I pin to it matters I do not want to forget or lose track of. One of the items there is an old-fashioned baggage tag, complete with strings for attaching it to trunks, suitcases, etc. On this tag, printed in large red letters, is one short word:

G - O - D.

It is there to keep reminding me that God is a word, a label, of completely human origin and invention. For German-speaking people that word would be Gott. For French-speaking people, it would be Dieu. For Spanish-speaking people, it would be Dios.

For me the question is not *Do I believe in God, or Does God exist?* The WORD God exists - one item among countless numbers of them - in The World of Words. The late Alfred Korzybski used a handy analogy to drive home a basic fact: As a map is not the territory it represents, a word is not the thing it stands for.

So the question my old baggage-tag suggests is, What element or power or force, actually existing in the vast universe-that-IS NOT-words, shall I fasten this label to?

For me, the answer is something I can't point to directly. I could only cite numerous examples of it. I have to resort to more words to describe it; and they would say essentially this: I symbolically fasten the word GOD to the power of the universe to bring forth out of its own components, more and more complex and sentient structures.

~ Adapted from William D. Hammond

Focus Question

To what experiences, forces, powers, principles, or feelings, actually existing in our lives, do we symbolically fasten the word GOD?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

~ Rabindranath Tagore

U& I Group Topic 3 Worship

Opening Words

Ancient as the home is the temple. Ancient as the workbench is the altar. Ancient as the soldier is the priest. Older than written language is spoken prayer; older than painting is the thought of a nameless one. Religion is first and last - the universal language of the human heart. Differing words describe the outward appearance of things; diverse symbols represent that which stands beyond and within. Yet each person's hunger is the same, and heart communicates with heart. Ever the vision leads on with many gods or with one, with a holy land washed by ocean waters, or a holy land within the heart. In temperament we differ, creeds divide us, but we share a common destiny. Because we are human, we shall ever build our altars; because each has a holy yearning, we offer everywhere our prayers and anthems. For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities; we are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family.

~ W. Waldemar W. Argow

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

This session is on the experience of worship. These are questions you might use. (It might be useful to write your group answers out on a large sheet of newsprint.)

What kinds of worship can you think of?

What is worship for?

Share an experience of memorable or moving worship.

What makes worship meaningful for you?

How do you prepare yourself for worship?

Is worship possible without a specific object, person, being, place, etc. to worship?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard,

the path is never clear,

and the stakes are high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth.

You are not alone.

~ Wayne B. Arnason

U& I Group Topic 4 What We Love

Opening Words

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees for 100 miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, ... and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting - over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

~ Mary Oliver

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

Mary Oliver says, You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. What do you love? Tell a story of when you first encountered one of your loves. How does it feel: doing or being with the thing you love? How do you feel when you are apart from it or unable to do it? Are you at peace with the things that you love to do or be? What would you have to do to let yourself love what you love? How could we help each other achieve that?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

As we leave this community of the spirit, may we remember the difficult lesson that each day offers more things than we can do. May we do what needs to be done, postpone what does not, and be at peace with what we can be and do. Therefore, may we learn to separate that which matters most from that which matters least of all.

~ Richard S. Gilbert

U& I Group Topic 5 Community

Opening Words

*Each of us brings a separate truth here,
We bring the truth of our own life, our own story.
We don't come as empty vessels...
But rather we come as full people - people who have our own story
and our own truth. We seek to add to our truths and add to our stories.
This room is rich with truth, rich with experience.
All manner of people are here
needy...joyful...frightened...anxious...bored...
We all bring our truth with us.
May we all recognize the truth and the story in everyone's life.
And may we hear and honor the truths that we all bring as
we gather together..
Together we have truths.
Together we have a story.
Together we are a community.*
~ Penny Hackett-Evans

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

A community is made up of people who enjoy and are ready to participate in mutual helpfulness. Not that they are busybodies always prying into one another's affairs. They are not conscious "do-gooders," but they know how to be helpful without making a big thing of it.
~ Harry Meserve

Focus Questions

How do we want to be in community together?
How do we want others to be?
What do we experience as helpful?
What do you need to know about me; and what do I need to know about you?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*And now we take our leave.
Before we gather here again - may each of us bring happiness into another's life;
may we each be surprised by the gifts that surround us;
may we each be enlivened by constant curiosity;
and may we remain together in spirit
'til the hour we meet again.*
~ Barbara Cheatham

U& I Group Topic 6 Living Simply

Opening Words

Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived. I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear, nor do I wish to practice resignation, unless it is quite necessary. I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. I want to cut a broad swath, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. If it proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or it is sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it.

~ Henry David Thoreau

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

Many of us would like to live more simply, to simplify our lives. But not many of us are likely to follow Thoreau's example and build a cabin in the woods. Consider these questions and share your answers:

What are the demands in my life that keep me too busy?

What needs or forces in me keep me busy?

What do I push aside?

What would I be willing to give up?

Closing question: What one thing are you willing to try in the next weeks (until the group meets again) that will move you closer to your goals for a simpler and more meaningful life?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*May the light around us guide our footsteps, and hold us fast
to the best and most righteous vision that we seek.*

*May the darkness around us nurture our dreams, and give us rest
so that we may give ourselves to the work of the world.*

*Let us seek to remember the wholeness of our lives,
the weaving of light and shadow in this great and astonishing dance in which we move.*

~ Kathleen McTigue

U& I Group Topic 7 Buddhist Teachings

Opening Words

These are the days that have been given to us - let us rejoice and be glad in them.

These are the days of our lives - let us live them well in love and service.

These are the days of mystery and wonder- let us cherish and celebrate them in gratitude together.

These are the days that have been given to us - let us make them stories worth telling to those who come after us.

~ William R. Murry

Check-in/Sharing

A Brief Introduction:

The basic teachings of Buddha are founded upon his 4 Noble Truths:

1) Pain is an inevitable part of this world of birth and death. 2) The Cause of Suffering is in our self-created distress when we respond to the Pain of the World. 3) Suffering can be eliminated by eliminating its Cause. 4) The Cause of Suffering can be eliminated through the Noble Path of Insight, Mindfulness, Virtue, and Compassion.

The Insight of Buddhism teaches that we over-focus on the ever-changing phenomena of life. We wallow in suffering. Buddha recognized that suffering is the result of our habits of mind in responding to pain. It is not the pain that causes the suffering. It is our habits of mind in responding to pain that causes the suffering.

Some modern pain management techniques are similar to Buddhist teachings in their advice to: notice the pain, respond to it, and then release your response and shift your attention away. Our tendencies to indulge in pain, wallow in it, or push it away all produce suffering. Releasing pain is like turning off a tape instead of playing it over and over again.

This is Mindfulness, instead of constantly monitoring our own misery, the practice of shifting our attention away. Move your attention off yourself and onto other people, onto other activities, onto almost anything other than self-monitoring. Lose yourself in something.

Buddhism teaches ways to achieve a calm, clear mind (a clear conscience, in other words). When this is done under special circumstances, like sitting still in silence and breathing deeply, it is called "Meditation." When it occurs during the course of daily life, it's called "Mindfulness."

Compassion is the realization that our own experience of suffering is universal, and this opens our heart to others. The practice of meditation cultivates this open heartedness which becomes the base for social action.

Virtue is the path of right thought, right speech, right action, right effort.

Focus Questions

How and what have you known of Buddhism in your own studies or friendships?

In what ways might the teachings of Buddha fit into your life or spiritual path?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

The Chocolate Chip Cookie Meditation: If you look deeply into a cookie, you can see more than just the cookie. You can see the wheat and the sugar cane from which the cookie was baked. You can see the sun, the wind and the rain which helped them to grow. You can see the farmers and the bakers and the driver of the truck that brought it to the store. If you look deeply at a cookie -- if you look deeply at anything -- you can see everything that is.

- Rev. Erik Walker Wilkstrom, First Universalist Church of Yarmouth, Maine

U& I Group Topic 8 The Sense of Gratitude

Opening Words

Who can make an accounting of gratitude?

For the universe we give thanks, an expanse of life to stretch us with wonder . . .

For the earth we give thanks, fragment of the stars that is our home . . .

*For life we give thanks, the burning of stars ordered and tempered here
allowing us life and breath . . .*

*For growth we give thanks, for the heritage of the spirit, for all the forces
past our knowing, power past our control . . .*

*For the ages which follow us, for the eternity of days, in which life is
ever renewed and fulfilled, we give thanks.*

~ from Kenneth Patton's *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

There are things in life that just sort of hang there: like free floating guilt and angst. But, what about a sense of gratitude? Doesn't that well up at times and demand expression? A blessing, a song of praise, a shout, a loud HURRAH! This sense of gratitude goes beyond just what another person does for you. It's inspired by the fiery sunset, the smell of the rose, the very existence of the artichoke and the giraffe. It should take our breath away. And our breath, oxygen - yes, thank you!

Focus Questions

How do you cultivate a thankful heart?

How do we stay aware of that in Life which is sheer blessing?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

God,

may our ears be open to little birds who are the secret of living,

may we take time to see flowers and people for the beauty they are,

may we make room in our lives for one another.

~ Richard F. Boeke

U& I Group Topic 9 Preparing for Christmas

Opening Words

*When the song of angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherd are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoners,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the brothers,
to make music in the heart.*

~ Howard Thurman

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

The relatives have gone. The harvest season passed with Thanksgiving. Even as we bought our turkey, the Salvation Army bells jangled our nerves toward Christmas. This is the advent of peace and goodwill, songs to be sung, choirs to do their Messiahs. There will be Christmas Teas and office parties, Christmas Fairs, and hot rum toddies. By this week we should have our cards in the mail, greetings to a hundred friends, each with a letter telling all that awe did for the year. Last week our packages should have been mailed. When is there time to go shopping?

Giving gifts takes more time than we have. Sitting in the endless traffic, hustling and bustling through the stores, lining up in the Post Office behind the man with six packages all going overseas, all to be insured, all to be registered.

Soon we'll be eating and drinking more than we should. Anxious, uneasy, we may miss the spirit we seek. We pause, center down, and reflect on the meaning of Christmas.

~Glenn H. Turner

Focus Questions

What are you feeling as we move into another Christmas season?

What do you dread?

What do you look forward to?

What rituals keep you focused?

If your tradition is not Christian (i.e., being Jewish, Muslim . . .) how do you experience this season?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Give us a child's heart, that we may be filled with wonder and delight.

~ Sara Moores Campbell

U& I Group Topic 10 *Mystery And Wonder*

Opening Words

The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources. The first one is: "The direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, that leads to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."

Check in/Sharing

Topic

Each one of us has experiences when the direct experience of mystery and wonder breaks through all of our normal defenses and hits us unexpectedly. It might be a sunset or the birth of a child. It might be a piece of music that moves us in an utterly unique way. It might be a sudden insight into our selves or a relationship. It might be the death of someone loved or a recovery from an illness. It might be almost anything, but the experience is one of being moved or illuminated or changed in a way that was not necessarily invited, or anticipated.

The language that poets and prophets and seekers have used to describe these experiences is humbling. Annie Dillard describes one such experience by writing: "I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck."

Focus Questions

Relate an experience when you were struck with mystery and wonder.

What did you learn? How were you changed?

Reflect on why these experiences lead to a renewal of the spirit, however you interpret that phrase.

What practices, techniques, tricks, or methods do you use to encourage these kinds of experiences, or try to put yourself in their path?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight. Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown.

~ Sara Campbell

U& I Group Topic 11 Transformation

Opening Words

*We look with uncertainty
Beyond the old choices for clear-cut answers
To a softer, more permeable aliveness
Which is every moment at the brink of death
For something new is being born in us, if we but let it
We stand at a new doorway, awaiting that which comes . . .
Daring to be human creatures
Vulnerable to the beauty of existence
Learning to love*

~ Anne Hillman

Check in/Sharing

Topic

Someone once said, “*The things a person learns between the ages of eighteen and thirty are mostly beyond the power of words to express.*” Indeed, life is a series of transformations between what we were and what we became afterwards. Some of these changes happen slowly over years; one day you realize that you barely remember the person you used to be. Other changes happen quickly, as when tragedy, sudden insight, or other life changes push us outside our normal boundaries.

Focus Questions

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “*We must be careful what we worship, for what we worship we are surely becoming.*”

What are you worshipping in your life right now? That is, what are you becoming?

In the best of all worlds, what would you like to become? What kind of person?

What would you like people to say about you when you're gone?

Relate a moment in your life when you realized that things would never be the same.

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*We shall not cease from our exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time*

~ T.S. Eliot

Opening Words

*May the Love which overcomes all differences
which heals all wounds,
which puts to flight all fears,
which reconciles all who are separated,
be in us and among us
now and always.*

~ Frederick E. Gillis

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

Most of us have a natural impulse to seek approval, to be liked and, if possible, to avoid conflict. So taking a position on an issue that is not shared by the majority takes real courage. As a result, we often keep our views to ourselves. And we might rationalize our behavior by saying, “What difference would one voice make?” or “My speaking out will just cause unnecessary conflict.” But, as Edmond Burke says, “All we need for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing.” And in addition to the loss to society—if our position is just—what does it do to our souls to be silent?

Above all, we must realize that no arsenal, or no weapon in the arsenals of the world, is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women. - Ronald Reagan

The test of courage comes when we are in the minority; the test of tolerance comes when we are in the majority. - Ralph W. Sockman

Few are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change. - Robert F. Kennedy

It is not the critic who counts...The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena...who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at best, knows achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly. - Theodore Roosevelt

Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve, that in good times or in tempests, I may not forget that to which my life is committed. Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve. - Howard Thurman

Focus Questions

Think about your answers to these questions, then choose one or more to share with the group.

- Do you feel a responsibility to be actively involved in social, political, moral, or religious issues at all? Please explain.

- Have you held a minority view on an important issue but not expressed it? Why?
- Have you ever expressed a minority view but regretted your decision? Why?
- Have you ever taken a stand and elicited a favorable response when you didn't expect it? What did you learn from that experience?
- Have you ever taken a stand and then been won over to the opposing side? Explain.
- Would you like the moral support of this group in taking a stand on something you feel strongly about?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Smile at each other,

Smile at your wife, smile at your husband,

Smile at your children, smile at each other --

It doesn't matter who it is --

And that will help you to grow up in greater love for each other.

~ Mother Teresa

U& I Group Topic 13 Who Is Your Family?

Opening Words

May the door of this home be wide enough to receive all who hunger for love, all who are lonely for friendship.

May it welcome all who have cares to unburden, thanks to express, hopes to nurture.

May the door of this house be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and pride, envy, and enmity.

May its threshold be no stumbling block to young or stained feet.

May it be too high to admit complacency, selfishness and harshness.

May this home be for all who enter, the doorway to richness and a more meaningful life.

~ The Siddur of Shir Chadash

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

Family- "A network of mutual commitment." (NIMH 1991)

Family is the first community that most of us know. When families fall apart, as they are doing now at an unprecedented rate, those who suffer through the breakup often lose faith not only in marriage but in every human bond. If compassion won't reach across the dinner table, how can it reach across the globe? If two or four or seven people who share house and food and even kinship can't get along, what are the prospects for harmony in larger and looser groups, in neighborhoods, cities, or nations?

~ Scott Russell Sanders

Focus Questions

Who are the people in your family? What are your family values?

Who do you show up for? Who shows up for you? Who do you have faith in?

Who are the people who know your secrets? With whom do you take the risk of relating?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

A long time I have lived with you and now we must be going separately to be together.

Perhaps I shall be the wind to blur your smooth waters – so that you do not see your face too much

Perhaps I shall be the star - to guide your uncertain wings so that you have direction in the night

Perhaps I shall be the fire – to separate your thoughts so that you do not give up

Perhaps I shall be the rain – to open up the earth so that your seed may fall

Perhaps I shall be the snow – to let your blossoms sleep so that you may bloom again in spring

Perhaps I shall be the stream – to play a song on the rock so that you are not alone

Perhaps I shall be a new mountain – so that you always have a home.

~ Nancy Wood

U& I Group Topic 14 Exploring Evil

Opening Words

The marvelous richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were no limitations to overcome. The hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful if there were no dark valley to traverse.

~ Hellen Keller

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

Alchemy is a process for extracting the living God from the most venal aspects of life. But that process cannot begin until the venality is acknowledged. It's not that we need to create venality. It already exists – explicitly and complicitly. It's more a matter of acknowledging it, admitting its existence in ourselves: in little actions, in fantasies, in secret deals, in hidden moments.

We're really talking about the difference between spirit and soul here. The path of the spirit is straight and upward. The path of the soul is crooked, downward and disturbing. The soul's road is the road of initiation into man or womanhood as well. Our purpose is not to be "good," but to be real, to know our darkness, the *via negativa*, not to be naïve and innocent. Initiation means knowing what we're capable of, our limits, our hungers, our desires. That is often painful knowledge to acquire. But we are only capable of responsibility and wise choice when we are aware of those factors. ~ Jerry Fjerkenstad

I've always thought that if Evil could be embodied in some kind of being, and I were somehow able to sit down with Evil for a conversation, the question I would probably ask first would be, "*What is it that makes you tick?*" "*Why are you Evil?*" The trouble is, at least in my imagination, that I suspect that evil would probably answer my question with another question. Evil might well ask me in turn, "*Why are you human?*" And I'd say something like "*Because I can't be anything else.*" And evil would probably say "*Exactly.*"

But evil (small e this time), so far as we know is not embodied in any kind of being called Satan or Lucifer. And certainly not, at least conclusively, in any historical figures like Stalin, Hitler, Sadaam Hussein, Slobodan Milosovich or even Eric Harris. The anti-christ, if he's coming, has not yet made any significant, self-defining gestures except perhaps for a generalized, inarticulate feeling of uneasiness as we approach the millennium. But as I've argued previously, I think the Jewish faith has hit it far closer to the mark by locating, not evil but the capacity for evil within every human heart and soul. Hence, I imagine also that if I were to ask evil, "*How am I to understand you?*" I expect that evil would probably say something to the effect of "*Maybe you should look in the mirror.*" Evil is like this. It is nothing if not elusive.

~ Mike Morran

Focus Questions

What is Evil? Does evil have reality independent of specific events - is there such a thing as evil in and of itself, or are there only instances of human behavior that are evil?

What personal experience(s) have you had with evil? How did you react emotionally?

Can you imagine yourself doing something that someone else would consider evil?

Is there an antidote for evil? In other words, can human evil ever be overcome?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

I know what evil is. Once or twice I have wrestled with it and for a time felt its chilly touch on my life; so I speak with knowledge when I say that evil is of no consequence, except as a sort of mental gymnastic. For the very reason that I have come in contact with it, I am more truly an optimist. I can say with conviction that the struggle which evil necessitates is one of the greatest blessings. It makes us strong, patient, helpful men and women. It lets us into the soul of things and teaches us that although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming of it.

~ Hellen Keller

U& I Group Topic 15 Work And Vocation

Opening Words

They thought that play and pleasure are more blissful than work; but there is nothing more blissful than work . . . and love, precisely because it is the supreme happiness, can be nothing other than work.

~ Rainer Maria Rilke

I don't like work -- no man does -- but I like what is in work -- the chance to find yourself, your own reality -- for yourself, not for others -- what no other man can ever know.

~ Joseph Conrad

Check in/Sharing

Topic

Think of human work as different from doing a job. Human work includes whatever we might do to earn a living, but it also includes washing the dishes, meditation, prayer, or self-improvement, raising our children, maintaining our relationships, shopping for groceries, jogging, thinking, doing the laundry, learning to love ... In short, human work is the work of Life.

To work is to exert energy in the hope that we will accomplish something. We seek to have an effect. But physics assures us that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. In other words, it is largely through our work in trying to shape the world that the world in turn shapes us. In this sense, engaging in the work of life is the channel, conduit, or primary way in which we learn about ourselves and the universe.

Focus Questions

How and where did you learn to work?

Remembering your childhood, what stories about work were (in)formative? often repeated?

Do you see any connections between those stories and your personal work history? Do you see any connection between those stories and how you think about work today?

Who were your role models about work and what did they teach?

If given the task, what and how would you teach a child about work?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

By the work one knows the worker. ~ Jean de la Fontaine

Work is love made visible. ~ Kahlil Gibran

U& I Group Topic 16 Liberal Quakerism

Opening Words

Eternal Spirit --

Oh, thou infinite ocean of love and light

In which we live and move and have our being,

Awaken us, we pray.

Open our eyes that we might see the beauty and wonder of thy Creation;

Open our ears that we might hear the still, small voice of thy Word;

Open our hearts that we might respond to thy indwelling presence in every living creature.

In the dark labyrinth of our pain and separation,

Sustain our faith, oh Lord, and hear our prayer;

Illuminate the path that will lead us home to thee,

And grant that we may be a light to those we meet along the way.

~ Daily Prayer by Brian Dunn

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

Several people taking the Beliefnet quiz (www.beliefnet.com) showed up with Liberal Quakerism ranking beside UUism as harmonious with their belief system.

The Society of Friends dates from 17th century England. A central conviction is that the saving knowledge and power of God are present as divine influences in each person. Quakers have no ordained ministers, believing that no intermediary is needed between worshippers and God. They do not celebrate outward Christian sacraments, believing that material symbols cannot represent the true inner spirit, and that every aspect of life is itself sacred. They seek an inward spiritual reality.

The Meeting (congregation) gathers in silence on the First Day (Sunday, in plain speech). No order of service but silence until the Spirit moves a member to comment, pray, sing, raise an issue. Any member or visitor may have the floor. One member has the task of concluding the session by starting to shake hands.

Until the 20th century, Friends addressed individuals with thou, thee. Though not so plain as the Amish or Mennonites, they have pursued simple dress and lifestyle. To the Friends, religion is above all a life to be lived, an experience to be shared. The outward expression and the inward experience are one. Quaker mysticism, the sense of the presence of God and the unity with God, is no withdrawal from life, but rather a springboard for action. Quakers emphasize working for the kingdom of God in this world, peace and nonviolence, abolishing slavery, relieving suffering, and eliminating prejudice. They abhor violence and oppose capital punishment and warfare (conscientious objectors in the Civil war and since).

Focus Questions

Could a good UU be a good Friend?

What is it like to sit in a silent circle in a plain room waiting for the “still small voice” to inspire someone?

What is it like to be a conscientious objector?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Go in peace. Live gently, simply, and at home in yourself.

Act justly. Speak justly.

Remember the depth of your own compassion.

Practice forbearance. Speak the truth.

Crave peace for all people in the world

Beginning with yourself.

And go, as you go, with the dream of that peace alive in your heart.

~ Mark Belletini

U& I Group Topic 17
I Know This Much Is True

Opening Words

We look with uncertainty beyond the old choices for clear-cut answers

- to a softer, more permeable aliveness*
- which is every moment on the brink of death;*

For something new is being born in us

- If we but let it.*

We stand at a new doorway, awaiting that which comes . . .

Daring to be human creatures, vulnerable to the beauty of existence, learning to love.

~ Anne Hillman

Check in/Sharing

Topic

Rev. Forrester Church has written, "Religion is the human response to the twin realities of being alive and having to die." Consider that death, just like life itself, are mysteries at the most fundamental level. Truth be told, we don't *know* when we are going when we die, any more than we *know* what got us into this mess in the first place! From the big bang forward, the whole show has been miracle itself! In our bumbling and limited way, human beings have tried to explain both existence and death using ideas, ideologies, philosophies, and theologies from Atheism to Zoroaster, and we are not one single step closer to possessing real understanding about either one.

That being the case, the existential reality of the human condition is that within a crucible of uncertainty and mystery we must forge our lives. We can use this idea of living in mystery, not as an excuse to go forward into the world all timid and cautious, but as the basic understanding that keeps our hearts and minds open -- as a constant reminder to stay receptive, eager to celebrate the power of our gifts, the joy of sharing ourselves with others, the hard-won meanings of precious insight, and the wonder of being given this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for living a life that we never asked for. A life that came to us like the proverbial gift of grace.

Focus Question

Living as we do, in a crucible of uncertainty and mystery regarding the great questions of human existence, begin by saying "I know this much is true . . ."

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

The value of having an inner map of the world as it is (not as it's broadcast) is this: it allows you to know that your task is larger than yourself.

~ Michael Ventura

U& I Group Topic 18 Kindness

Opening Words

Enter with me the sacred space.

Bring with you what is yours --

a burdened heart, a joyous song, a wearied spirit, a seeking mind.

Bring the gift of yourself to the altar. It is an honorable gift.

~ Amarette Callaway

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

I believe that what we do matters. The endeavors, actions, efforts, words and deeds that make up our lives are important. They affect the world, they affect the people around us and they affect our very souls, adding or subtracting as the case may be from the sum total of the compassion, wholeness, and love that is our religious potential.

~ Mike Morran

Just because an animal is large, it doesn't mean he doesn't want kindness. However big Tigger seems to be, remember that he wants as much kindness as Roo.

~ *Pooh's Little Instruction Book*, inspired by A. A. Milne

Focus Questions

What's the best thing you've ever done to make a difference for someone else?

What one wonderful thing have you ever done spontaneously, unexpectedly, that surprised even you?

What random acts of kindness have you done?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Don't think that love, to be true, has to be extraordinary. What is necessary is to continue to love. How does a lamp burn, if it is not by the continuous feeding of little drops of oil? . . .

Dear friends, what are our drops of oil in our lamps? They are the small things from every day life: the joy, the generosity, the little good things, the humility and the patience. A simple thought for someone else. To be silent, to listen, to forgive, to speak and to act. Those are the real drops of oil that make our lamps burn vividly our whole life.

~ Mother Teresa

U& I Group Topic 19
Forgiveness

Opening Words

*If you knew how I felt inside, you would not act that way outside.
But most likely,
If I knew how you felt inside
I would not mind so much the way you act outside.
Why don't we try
turning ourselves
inside out!*

~ Edward T. Atkinson

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

We cannot let the world's wounds destroy our spirits. We cannot let our hurts and betrayals destroy our capacity for growth and caring. That there will be judgment and, perhaps, justice, is necessary. That the violence be confronted and, if possible, contained is essential. But, most important is our capacity to nurture a loving heart, to affirm and not to curse, to forgive even when we cannot completely forget.

~ Glenn Turner

Focus Questions

How do you respond when you are wounded?

How do you feel toward the person who has hurt you?

How long do you carry your anger and how does that "re-sentiment" (feeling it again and again) continue to hurt you?

Can you forgive and break the cycle? Can you understand the other?

What does forgiveness mean to you?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*May the Love which overcomes all differences
which heals all wounds,
which puts to flight all fears,
which reconciles all who are separated,
be in us and among us
now and always.*

~ Frederick E. Gillis

U& I Group Topic 20 The Art Of Loving

Opening Words

*Love cannot remain by itself - it has no meaning
Love has to be put into action and that action is service.
Whatever form we are, able or disabled, rich or poor,
It is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the doing;
A lifelong sharing of love with others.
~ Mother Teresa*

Check in/Sharing

Topic

Is love an art? Then it requires knowledge and effort. Or is love a pleasant sensation, which to experience is a matter of chance, something one "falls into" if one is lucky?

Not that people think that love is unimportant. They are starved for it; they watch endless numbers of films about happy and unhappy love stories, they listen to hundreds of trashy songs about love -- yet hardly anyone thinks that there is anything that needs to be learned about love.

This peculiar attitude is based on several premises which either singly or combined tend to uphold it. Most people see the problem of love primarily as that of *being loved*, rather than that of *loving*, of one's capacity to love. Hence the problem to them is how to be loved, how to be lovable.

A second premise behind the attitude that there is nothing to be learned about love is the assumption that the problem of love is the problem of an object, not the problem of a faculty. People think that to love is simple, but that to find the right object to love, or be loved by, is difficult.

A third error leading to the assumption that there is nothing to be learned about love lies in the confusion between the initial state of *falling* in love and the permanent state of *being* in love.

The first step to take is to become aware that *love is an art*; just as living is an art.
~ Erich Fromm

Focus Questions

How much love is present in your life?
What can you (or any of us) do to increase our capacity for love?
Relate an experience when your understanding of love deepened.
What opportunities did you miss before that experience?
How are things different now?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*And now these faith and hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.
~ 1 Corinthians 13*

Opening Words:

Step out onto the Planet

Draw a circle a hundred feet round.

Inside the circle

are 300 things nobody understands and maybe

nobody's ever really seen.

How many can you find?

~ Lew Welch

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

1) We know today, thanks to the last 30 years of dream research, that dreams are not instigated by wishes or other psychological forces, but by a periodic or automatic biological process: REM sleep. The good news for Freud is this: every period of dreaming sleep is accompanied by sexual arousal, as indicated in males by erections, and in females by increased vaginal blood flow. Had Freud lived to hear of this phenomenon, he would have almost certainly regarded it as a complete vindication of his belief that at the bottom of every or almost every dream was -- sex!

~ Stephen LaBerge, Lucid Dreaming

2) Whatever the explanation for dreaming must be, we must dream for the same reason that all mammals have dreamed for more than a hundred million years. This is a question for evolutionary biology. Active or REM sleep evolved about 130 million years ago, when early mammals gave up laying eggs and first began to give birth viviparously (born live, not hatched). Non-REM or Quiet Sleep, on the other hand, seems to have arisen some 50 million years earlier, when the warm-blooded mammals first evolved from their cold-blooded reptilian ancestors.

~ Stephen LaBerge, Lucid Dreaming

3) Another dream determinant is telepathy. The authenticity of this phenomenon can no longer be disputed. I have found by experience that telepathy does in fact influence dreams, as has been asserted since ancient times. Certain people are particularly sensitive in this respect and often have telepathically influenced dreams.

~ Carl Jung

4) Carl Jung believed that at the center of everyone's self is the collective unconscious--that kernel in each of us that is a part of all humanity. For Jung, dreams were an important connection with not only our own individual selves, but with that larger Self, or God. Today many dream workers have expanded that Self to include not just humanity but everything in the universe. Indeed, it is hard to work with dreams for very long without beginning to think in theological terms, for as we examine them and learn from them, we are often left with extremely powerful images and insights which can seem staggering in their depth and meaning.

~ Rev. Janet Emmons

5) Reincarnation is true even though people don't have conscious recall of all their past memories. The soul carries over the essence of the spiritual aspect of the activities and lessons it needs to face in the current lifetime. Each soul has the original impress given to it at creation,

that purpose for which it was created. This impress stimulates dreams in order to help the soul fulfill its destiny.

~ J. Everett Irion, *Why Do We Dream?*

6) Experiential dream work encompasses all the activities involved in developing an active relationship with dreams. These include learning to recall dreams, keeping a dream journal, and sharing dreams with others. At the same time, special emphasis is placed on techniques that encourage the dreamer to reenter the dream and to experience it again from a waking perspective. This, combined with an exploration of its symbolic content, is the experience that is thought most conducive to genuine insight.

~ Deborah Hillman, *Dream Work and Field Work*

7) An uninterpreted dream is like an unopened letter. ~ The Talmud

8) Dreams have much more in common with poems than they do with letters. Are all poems equally coherent, effective, or worth reading? If you wrote a dozen poems a night every night of your life, what do you suppose you would find among your several hundred thousand poems. All masterpieces? Not likely. All trash? Not likely either. What you would expect is that among great piles of trivial doggerel, there would be a smaller pile of excellent poems, but no more than a handful or perfect masterpieces. It is the same with your dreams, I believe. When you have to do five or six shows every night, many of them are likely to lack inspiration. Why should you expect that every one of your dreams is worth taking the time to interpret? And yet, if a poem or a dream calls out to you to interpret it, by all means find out what it means.

~ Stephen LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming*

9) Dreams are reactions to random nervous system stimuli which the brain interprets as bizarre images and other sensory hallucinations. The reason that dream content often seems disoriented or bizarre is because the activated brain-mind does its best to attribute meaning to the internally generated signals of the brain.

~ Dr J. Allan Hobson, *The Brain as Dream State Generator*

Focus Questions

Discuss these readings as they reflect your own experience or opinions about dreams. Tell about any dream work you have done - dream journaling, prophetic dreaming, lucid dreaming, dream interpretation, etc. - and how that has changed your view of the significance of dreams.

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

~ Rilke

U& I Group Topic 22 Mythology

Opening Words

These are the days that have been given to us - let us rejoice and be glad in them.

These are the days of our lives - let us live them well in love and service.

These are the days of mystery and wonder - let us cherish and celebrate them in gratitude together.

These are the days that have been given to us - let us make them stories worth telling to those who come after us.

~ William R. Murry

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

"Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human manifestation." ~ Joseph Campbell

1) A rich man who was dying called his 3 sons and gave them a task to see who was most capable at managing money. "In my warehouse are 3 large storage rooms, all of the same size. Here is a bag of silver. Your task is to fill one storeroom with as much as your silver will buy. To the best I will leave my entire wealth." The first son bought sand with all his money and filled 1/3 of his storeroom. The second spent all his money on soil and filled 1/2 of his storeroom. The third spent only a small portion of his money and bought some candles and matches to fill all his room with light.

2) In Babylon, the people spoke the same language and worked together on great projects. They decided to build a temple tower so high that it would reach all the way to heaven. As the tower became higher and higher, God looked down from heaven and saw that the people had one language, lived together in a large city, and worked together for a common purpose. In their prosperity and achievements, they were becoming proud and vain. God gave the people of Babylon different languages. Suddenly, they could not understand one another and could no longer work together in harmony. All of the people who had been building the tower in Babylon quit their work and they scattered across the world. They banded together in small groups, which soon were fighting between and among themselves. The great tower was never finished and war grew among mankind.

Focus Question

Mythology, legends, and folktales provide endless resources for interpretation and inspiration. Share a myth or legend that has symbolic meaning for you in your view of yourself or the world.

Shared Reflections

Closing Words:

May beauty infuse our lives. May a vision lead and guide our ways. May others, sharing, make us wise. And love ennoble all our days.

~ Gordon Gibson

Opening Words

Sweet Jesus, talking his melancholy madness, stood up in the boat and the sea lay down, silky and sorry. So everybody was saved that night. But you know how it is when something different crosses the threshold – the uncles mutter together, the women walk away, the young brother begins to sharpen his knife.

Nobody knows what the soul is. It comes and goes like the wind over the water – sometimes, for days, you don't think of it. Maybe, after the sermon, after the multitude was fed, one or two of them felt the soul slip forth like a tremor of pure sunlight, before exhaustion, that wants to swallow everything, gripped their bones and left them miserable and sleepy, as they are now, forgetting how the wind tore at the sails before he rose and talked to it – tender and luminous and demanding as he always was – a thousand times more frightening than the killer sea.

~ Mary Oliver

Check in/Sharing

Topic

According to Marcus Borg, there are essentially two images of Jesus that continue to shape Christianity and Christian life: Jesus as Savior, and Jesus as Teacher. Borg claims that both of these images are incomplete and therefore inadequate. Most of us come with various experiences of Jesus and teachings about Jesus that go back to some of our earliest memories, some positive, some negative, and to a great extent inseparable from the family and church culture we grew up in. To begin the first of our three-part exploration of Christianity, and to put some context on this very complex and emotionally charged subject, imagine you are looking at a blank piece of paper with the word *Jesus* printed across the top.

Focus Questions

Thinking of images, pictures and concepts, what are your earliest memories of Jesus - and how did those images change through adolescence and into adulthood?

How would you describe your emotional impression of Jesus - was he *tender? luminous? demanding? . . .* or what?

At this point in your life, how would you answer the question, who (or what) *was* Jesus? Does it matter? Why or why not?

Something about these images of Jesus has captured the religious imaginations of generations.

What *is* that something? Is it Truth? Fear? Symbolism? A good story? Politics?

Something else???

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.

~ W.E. B. DuBois

U& I Group Topic 24 Christianity

Opening Words

If we were not something more than unique human beings, if each one of us could really be done away with once and for all by a single bullet, storytelling would lose all purpose. But every man is more than just himself; he also represents the unique, the very special and always significant and remarkable point at which the world's phenomenon intersect, only once in this way and never again. That is why every man's story is important, eternal, sacred; that is how every man, as long as he lives and fulfills the will of nature, is wondrous, and worthy of every consideration. In each individual the spirit has become flesh, in each man the creation suffers, within each one a redeemer is nailed to the cross.

~ Herman Hesse

Check In/Sharing

Topic

Hardly anything in Liberal Religion brings up more controversy than Christianity. From modern biblical scholarship, which believes that over three quarters of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is inauthentic, to fundamentalists insisting on a literal interpretation of every word of scripture, Christianity cuts a wide path through Western society.

Unitarian Universalists have occupied a particular niche on this broad social and religious spectrum, generally dismissing the trinity, insisting on the enlightened use of reason in religion, and shifting religious authority from the external (bible, church, and priesthood) to the internal (the individual's mind, heart, conscience, experience, and faith). Even so, our UU roots are clearly in the Judeo-Christian tradition: our worship format (generally) follows the vast majority of Protestant Sunday services; UU history is full of people who proudly called themselves Christian; and professing Christians continue to play a significant role in Unitarian Universalism in general, and in countless individual Unitarian Universalist churches.

Let us be concerned with the Christian potential for spiritual and social transformation. The Christianity of Jesus, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Father Daniel Berrigan and countless others is a movement of spiritual and social transformation. In essence, so too is the Christianity of James Dobson and Jerry Falwell.

Focus Questions

Just what *is* a Christian? Are Unitarian Universalists Christian?

After two thousand years, has Christianity exhausted its potential for spiritual and social transformation? What would a religion with transforming power look, taste, and feel like?

Beyond historical trends, is there anything of the Christian message and potential that Unitarian Universalists should claim or embrace?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

If it is language that makes us human, one half of language is to listen. Silence can exist without speech, but speech cannot live without silence. Listen to the speech of others. Listen even more to their silence. To pray is to listen to the revelations of nature, to the meaning of events. To listen to music is to listen also to silence, and to find the stillness deepened and enriched.

~ Jacob Trapp

U& I Group Topic 25 Learning from Failure

Opening Words

*We gather to affirm the potential we all share:
for building community, for undertaking constructive change,
for engaging in mature growth,
for achieving greater humanity than we have known.
May our meeting together be a time of reflection on possibilities untried.
May it help us on our perilous ways during the week ahead.*

~ adapted from Harold Babcock

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

Whether or not we soften the sense of "sinners" to what Eugene Kennedy calls "mistake makers," the fact remains we are not and never can be perfect. This is not to say we are condemned to making the same mistakes over and over. If we learn from past mistakes, we shall have the joy and sorrow of making some entirely new ones and learning from them as well. That is learning. That is growth. That is what being alive is all about.

~ Glenn Turner

Focus Questions

What have we learned from our mistakes or our failures?

How do we make imperfection a wise teacher?

What is humility? And how does humility change the way we experience failure?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight. Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are, and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown.

~ Sara Campbell

U& I Group Topic 26 Our Fathers

Opening Words

Blessed is the match, consumed in the kindling flame.

Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret places of the heart.

Blessed are You, Source of the Universe.

~ Hebrew Prayer

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

With the city-state, power came wrapped in the robes of authority. God was now Lord or king, protector, enforcer, and judge. With Jesus, God became Father (in fact, Daddy, or Abba), a far more intimate authority figure. ~ Forrest Church

How do we forgive our fathers? Maybe in a dream? Do we forgive our fathers for leaving us too often, or forever when we were little? Maybe for scaring us with unexpected rage or making us nervous because there never seemed to be any rage there at all. Do we forgive our fathers for marrying or not marrying our mothers? For divorcing or not divorcing our mothers? And shall we forgive them for their excesses of warmth . . . or coldness? Shall we forgive them for pushing or leaning? Or shutting doors? Or speaking through walls? Or never speaking? Or never being silent? Will we forgive our fathers in our age . . . or in theirs? Or in their death? If we forgive our fathers, what is left? ~ Dick Lourie, Native American poet

I never know where you'll turn up next. Jesse and I were backpacking in the Smoky Mountains. We made camp in a grove of hickories and oaks that you would have admired. I was telling him about my own hikes with you. Then along toward supper time the sky turned dark and ornery with a coming storm. Before the rain hit, we decided to rig our ponchos into an awning to cover the stove. In order to stretch a line from one tree to the next, we needed to tie a pair of ropes together. I knew the best knot for the job was a sheet bend, a favorite of sailors and farmers, as you explained on the day you taught it to me. I hadn't tied one in years, and so long as I stared at the ropes I couldn't remember how. Then I shut my eyes and my hands began to move, weaving the ropes; when I looked again, there was the proper knot. Jesse and I stayed dry under the awning. After we ate, he asked me to show him how to tie a sheet bend. So I did, and there you were again, reaching through my hands, reaching through his.

~ from Scott Russell Sanders, writing in memoriam to his father

Focus Questions

Who were these men who were our fathers? What did they strive for? How are we like them?

How are we different? What did they teach us? What did they never learn?

Tell two stories about your fathers - one positive, one negative.

What have you never forgiven them for? For what will you always be grateful?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the un-lived life of the parent.

~ Carl Jung

U& I Group Topic 27
Our Mothers

Opening Words

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved . . . the ones who never yawn and say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars.

~ Jack Kerouac

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

We are raised to believe that mother love is different from other kinds of love. It is not open to error, doubt, or to the ambivalence of ordinary affections. This is an illusion. Mothers may love their children, but they sometimes do not like them. The same woman who may be willing to put her body between her child and a runaway truck will often resent the day-by-day sacrifice the child unknowingly demands of her time, sexuality, and self-development.

~ Nancy Friday

To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power.

~ Maya Angelou

Focus Questions

These are just some of the hundreds of books in the library about mothers and motherhood, and some chapter titles:

Supermom	A Woman's Place	Becoming Your Own Person
Images of Imprisonment	Mothers Can Do Anything	Parental Guilt
Motherhood is Not a Rehearsal	Mothering Without a Compass	The Empty Nest - Hurrah!?
The Mother Dance: What Children Do to Your Life	Life's' Work: Confessions of an Unbalanced Mom	Motherhood: The Ultimate Full-Time Job
Myth of the Perfect Mother	My Mother Talks to Trees	Sex and the Married Woman
As Good as I Could Be	The Controlling Mom	The Trophy Mom
How to Help your Husband Make More Money So You Can Be a Stay-At-Home Mom	Carpool Diem - Seize the Ride	Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession

Focus Questions

Imagine you are writing a book about your mother. What would its title be and what chapters would you include? How would you portray her for all the world to read? What would you not include? Where would you fit into a book about your mother's life and dreams?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

We are all the creation makers and a new world is awaiting creation. Follow your own path and discover your own wisdom within the larger wisdom that we all share.

~ from Hallie Inglehart, "Womanspirit"

U& I Group Topic 28 Reclaiming the Language of Religion

Opening Words:

How often I want to shout: "Every moment is a sacred moment!" To grab people, turn them around, upside down, and pull them out of mundaneness, screaming, "Every moment is a sacred moment!" - For it will not come again.

~ Rev. David Rankin

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

God, faith, evil, grace, prayer, miracles, angels, soul, religion, and sin are just a few examples of worrisome words for many UUs. Anxiety over too literal meanings of such words can close a door to possible insight, block us from touching into deeper spiritual levels, cheat us out of communication with good people of different beliefs.

A Buddhist saying cautions against "mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself." . . . In religion, I think there are hundreds of words that point to what many call God, and the word God can be said to point to a hundred different beyonds. The language of religion is broad and imprecise. . . And there is the word "worship" - a stickler in many UU congregations. Its root means "to shape or be shaped by that which is of worth." It doesn't say anything about God or submission - the two things I think most commonly disturb UUs most about the word worship.
~ from a sermon by Rev. Jill Ann Terwilliger, Dakota UU Church

Focus Questions

Pick one or two religious words that are "worrisome" for you and look back at your personal relationship with that word. How and when did its traditional meaning become provocative for you? How would you re-define it in your own terms so that hearing and using it would fit in with your spiritual vision?

As a group, choose one religious word to reclaim. Can the group, without over-trivializing it, come up with a definition that is meaningful for all members?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*Love the earth and the animals,
despise riches,
give alms to everyone who asks,
stand up for the stupid and crazy,
devote your income and labor to others,
hate tyrants,
and argue not concerning God.*

~ Walt Whitman

U& I Group Topic 29 Growth of the Soul

Opening Words

*Waking up this morning, I smile,
Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.
I vow to live fully each moment
and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.*
~ Thich Nhat Hanh

Check-in/Sharing

Focus

William Ellery Channing, known as the "Father of American Unitarians," inspired a powerful spiritual reorientation in American religious thought. Channing pictured the soul as a seed. The soul, he insisted, can grow. It is a living thing, like a plant, and with careful nurturing it can be urged to develop its intrinsic potentiality into fullness. Religion, he said, is not a matter of creed or doctrine, but an activity. It is a process of bringing the "infinite potential" in the "divine seed," the "soul," into "ever-increasing reality in the moral and spiritual life." This image is common today, but expressed in the early 1800s (as an alternative to the gloomy doctrine of Puritan Calvinism, which described humans as naturally depraved, corrupt in their core, and powerless to change their foreordained destiny) it evoked lively, often bitter theological battles.

~ from Roy Phillips, *Letting Go*

The Roman writer Apuleius said, "everyone should know that you can't live in any other way than by cultivating the soul." Care can also mean cultivation, watching, and participating as the seed of soul unfolds into the vast creation we call character or personality, with a history, a community, a language, and a unique mythology. Cultivation of the soul implies a lifelong husbanding of raw materials. Farmers cultivate their fields, all of us cultivate our soul.

~ Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*

Focus Questions

What do you think the soul is? Do you think the soul can grow? Tell about a time you witnessed that - in somebody else and in yourself. If you don't think the soul can grow, what in your experience tells you this?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*I am the dust in the sunlight, I am the ball of the sun . . .
I am the mist of morning, the breath of evening
I am the spark in the stone, the gleam of gold in the metal
The rose and the nightingale drunk with its fragrance.*

*I am the chain of being, the circle of the spheres,
The scale of creation, the rise and the fall.
I am what is and is not . . .
I am the soul in all.*

~ Rumi

U& I Group Topic 30 Love and Relationship

Opening Words

I want to be more loving. Often there are good and sufficient reasons for exercising what seems a clean direct resentment. Again and again, I find it hard to hold in check the sharp retort, the biting comeback when it seems that someone has done violence to my self-respect and decent regard. How natural it seems to "give as good as I get," to "take nothing lying down," to announce to all and sundry in a thousand ways that "no one can run over me and get away with it!" All this is a part of the thicket in which my heart gets often caught again and again. Deep within me, I want to be more loving – to glow with a warmth that will take the chill off the room I share with those whose lives touch mine in the traffic of my goings and comings. I want to be more loving! ~ from Howard Thurman

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

The rate of divorce in the US is over 50%. Often, especially when there are children involved, the decision to stick with or to leave a failing marriage or partnership is agonizing. What is the right thing to do - for the heart, for the soul, for the children? Some believe that the problem with so many failed relationships is lack of commitment or fortitude. Some even think it's a lack of good religion. Many believe relationships fail because so many people enter them with unreasonably high expectations of what it means to be in a long-term intimate relationship, and a complete misunderstanding of what love is. Some believe that it's just a matter of being lucky enough to find the right person.

Nonetheless, human beings seem programmed to love. Even children who have suffered terrible abuse from their parents will describe them in loving terms and feel strong, affectionate bonds with their tormentors. At some basic, animal level, we seem to need each other. And, with very, very few cultural exceptions, couples of whatever sexual orientation seem to be the basic family unit for mammals on planet earth.

Focus Questions

What makes a long-term relationship work? What makes love stay (or go away)?

Does love still matter after 30 years with the same person? Why or why not?

Is "romantic love" still possible with the same person after 30 years?

Is there such a thing as a "soul mate?" Is there someone for everyone out there somewhere?

Why DO so many relationships fail?

Imagine your only child is about to make a life-long commitment to their chosen partner. What is the best advice you could give them? (If you don't have children, use your imagination and answer the question anyway.) What advice do you wish you had been given?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

I love you 1 ever

2 ever

3 ever

4 ever

more

~ Robin Hirsh "Counting to Infinity"

U& I Group Topic 31 Living Through Loss

Opening Words

*Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all,
And round beneath me was the whole hoop of the world.
And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell,
And understood more than I saw.
For I was seeing in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit
And the shapes as they must live together like one being.
And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that make one circle,
wide as daylight and starlight,
And in the center grew one mighty flowering tree
To shelter all the children of one mother and one father.
And I saw that it was holy.*

~ Black Elk

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

I have journeyed to a place of great sorrow and there did I cry from the very depths of my soul. For days you thought I might never return, but I have come back to you: stronger, richer, with greater knowledge of myself. The crack in my heart will remain forever - its purpose no longer to let grief out, but to let greater love in.

~ Myrriah Osbourde

Focus Questions

Share an experience of loss that has been a significant part of your life journey.

Where in your life journey were the dark places?

Where were you lonely?

How has your experience of loss shaped you? Your faith?

What strength has it given you?

Shared Reflections

Closing words

Hold on to what is good, even if it is a handful of earth.

Hold on to what you believe even if it is a tree which stands by itself.

Hold on to what you must do even if it is a long way from here.

Hold on to my hand even when I have gone away from you.

~ Nancy Wood

U& I Group Topic 32 Letting Your Life Speak

Opening Words

Sometime when the river is ice, ask me mistakes I have made. Ask me whether what I have done is my life. Others have come in their slow way into my thought, and some have tried to help or to hurt: ask me what difference their strongest love or hate has made. I will listen to what you say. You and I can turn and look at the silent river and wait. We know the current is there, hidden; and there are comings and goings from miles away that hold the stillness exactly before us. What the river says, that is what I say.

~ William Stafford

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

Ask me whether what I have done is my life. For some, those words will be nonsense, nothing more than a poet's loose way with language and logic. Of course what I have done is my life! To what am I supposed to compare it?

But for others, and I am one, the poet's words will be precise, piercing, and disquieting. They remind me of moments when it is clear - if I have eyes to see - that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me. In those moments I sometimes catch a glimpse of my true life, a life hidden like the river beneath the ice. And in the spirit of the poet I wonder: What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about - quite apart from what I would like it to be about - or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.

That insight is hidden in the word vocation itself, which is rooted in the Latin for "voice." Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truth and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live - but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.

~ Parker Palmer

Focus Questions

What comes immediately to mind after the reading from Parker Palmer?

Relate a moment when you had a sense that the life you were (or are) living is not the same as the life that wants to live in you. Then, relate a moment when you knew that the life you were (or are) living is exactly the life that wants to live in you.

Talk about pursuing a goal vs. following a calling. Is there a difference? Does this difference have any practical meaning? Would your life look any different if your life were you in the same way that a tree is a tree, a cloud is a cloud, or water is wet?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

You don't get to choose how you're going to die. Or when. You can only decide how you're going to live. Now.

~ Joan Baez

U& I Group Topic 33
Your Private Dinner Party

Opening Words

*Somewhere, there are people to whom we speak with passion
without having the words catch in our throats.*

*Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,
voices will celebrate with us
whenever we come into our own power.*

*Community means strength that joins our strength
to do the work that needs to be done.*

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A healing circle.

A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

*~ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark**

Check-in/Sharing

Topic

"The Dinner Party" is a work of art, triangular in configuration, 48 feet on each side, that employs numerous media, including ceramics, china-painting, and needlework, to honor women's achievements. An immense open table covered with fine white cloths is set with 39 place settings, thirteen on a side, each commemorating a goddess, historic personage, or important woman.

~ Judy Chicago

In excited conversation we have glimpses of the universe, hints of power native to the soul, far-darting lights and shadows of an Andes landscape, such as we can hardly attain in lone meditation. Here are oracles sometimes profusely given, to which the memory goes back in barren hours.

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

Focus Questions

Who are the people - living, dead, fictional, mythological - you would invite to sit around the table with you for a private dinner and conversation? Why these people?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light

~ Dr. Albert Schweitzer

U&I Group Topic 34
From Generation to Generation

Opening Words

*We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,
to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature
so that creation need not play to an empty house.*
-- Annie Dillard

Check-In / Sharing

Topic

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musing and deeds.

Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations . . .

Let us bring up our children. It is not the place of some official to hand them their heritage.

If others impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, they will lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder.

Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys.

We live, not by things, but by the meaning of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

-- Antoine De St.-Exupery

Focus Questions

What are those wordless wonders that give us meaning?

What did you learn from the generation that came before you -- what rituals, what beliefs, what treasures?

What would you like to pass on to the generation that is to come after you?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*The love and the work of friends and lovers
belong to the task and are its health.*

*Rest and rejoicing belong to the task,
and are its grace.*

Let tomorrow come tomorrow.

Not by your will is the house carried through the night.

-- Wendell Berry

Opening Words

To live content with small means;
To seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;
To be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich;
To study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;
To listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart;
To bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.
To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common.
This is to be my symphony.
-- William Henry Channing

Check-In / Sharing

Topic

The message we get in our culture is that the symphony of our life should be to fit in, to buy stuff, to follow the established patterns. Channing asks for something different from his life – to be honest to his own self, to do right, to stay open to the universe.

Focus Questions

What would you like your symphony to be?
What is the discordant note in your life?
Are you finding the time to rehearse?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Go your ways,
knowing not the answers to all things,
yet seeking always the answer
to one more thing than you know.
-- John W. Brigham

Opening Words

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out for another is to risk exposing our true self.

To place our ideas – our dreams – before the crowd is to risk loss.

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To hope is to risk despair.

To try is to risk dying.

-- Anon.

Check-In / Sharing

Topic

“Look, I really don’t want to wax philosophic, but I will say that if you’re alive, you got to flap your arms and legs, you got to jump around a lot, you got to make a lot of noise, because life is the very opposite of death. And therefore, as I see it, if you’re quiet, you’re not living. You’ve got to be noisy, or at least your thoughts should be noisy and colorful and lively.” – Mel Brooks

Focus Questions

What is life-affirming for you?

What reasons do you have to flap your arms and legs and be noisy?

Do you let yourself let go?

What reminds you that you are alive?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*Lead me from death to life,
from falsehood to truth.*

*Lead me from despair to hope,
from fear to trust.*

*Lead me from hate to love,
from war to peace.*

*Let peace fill our hearts,
our world, our universe.*

-- Project Ploughshares

U&I Topic 37 Silence

Opening Words

It is our quiet time.

We do not speak, because the voices are within us.

It is our quiet time.

We do not walk, because the earth is all within us.

It is our quiet time.

We do not dance, because the music has lifted us to a place where the spirit is.

It is our quiet time.

We rest will all of nature. We wake when the seven sisters wake.

We greet them in the sky over the opening of the kiva.

--Nancy Wood

Quiet Time

Using a clock or watch, take 3 minutes to be silent.

Check-In / Sharing

After each person speaks, take 1 minute to be silent.

Topic

Our lives often seem full of noise. To be in the moment, sometimes we will have to be silent. Of course, as UU minister David Bumbaugh has said, "the earth is nowhere silent." All the time, little noises are happening. In the silence to follow, listen to the noises you do hear.

Using a clock or watch, take 3 minutes to be silent. Then:

What did you hear?

Now, this time, simply be in the silence. Let your mind wander, let your body relax, let your breathing slow. Take 3-4 minutes to be silent. How did this feel?

Focus Questions

When in your life do you let things be silent?

When is silence what you need?

When is silence too unsettling, or too lonely?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days during early adult life. Darkness would make one more appreciate of sight and silence would teach one the joys of sound.

-- Helen Keller

Opening Words

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.
To reach out for another is to risk exposing our true self.
To place our idea—our dreams—before the crowd is to risk loss.
To love is to risk not being loved in return.
To hope is to risk despair.
To try is to risk failure.
To live is to risk dying.
--Anon.

Check-In / Sharing

Topic

“Once bitten, twice shy.” It only takes one or two experiences of being hurt for us to learn to be careful. Sometimes this is a good thing – with ovens and knives and cars. But sometimes we get hurt, and learn lessons, in ways that close us off to other people. When love or friendship fails, when violence strikes, when we are made to feel shame, then we learn to hold back our feelings, to keep quiet our ideas and dreams. But then we are living incomplete lives. There needs to be a place where we can share who we are, completely, even those parts of us we are uncomfortable with. We are not meant to live solitary lives of quite desperation.

Focus Questions

Recall an experience when you were hurt unfairly or saw another hurt, where you might have learned to hold back. What was this like?

Are there things you would like to share, but don't? Why not?

How do you learn to trust people enough to share something important with them?

[It may be helpful to ask people to write down their thoughts for five or so minutes. They don't have to share what they've written if they don't want to.]

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Don't be afraid to take a big step if one is indicated. You can't cross a chasm in two small jumps. – David Lloyd George

Opening Words

When Tao is lost, there is goodness.

When goodness is lost, there is philanthropy.

When philanthropy is lost, there is justice.

When justice is lost, there is etiquette.

Now etiquette is the husk of faith and loyalty, the beginning of confusion.

Knowledge of the future is only a flowery trapping of the Tao.

It is the beginning of folly.

Thus the sage sets her sights on the substance,

and not the surface,

On the fruit and not the flower,

Leaving the one, she gains the other.

-- Tao Te Ching

Check-In / Sharing

Topic

For those of us who claim this faith of the free, the faith of larger liberty, our responsibility to live lives of spiritual integrity is acute. The caricature of Unitarian Universalism is that we are the religion where you can believe anything you want. And we do have the freedom to make up our own mind on religious questions, to accept or reject whichever propositions we deem worthy or unworthy of our assent. But we are not free to believe whatever we want. Instead, we are free to believe what we must. The steps of integrity apply to our religious lives, too: we must discern what is true and what is false. We must act on what we hold true, even when such action is risky or difficult. And we must speak honestly about our actions. What I would add to this – both in the realm of religious ideas and in the realm of ethical action – is that we must keep an open mind that our discernment may have been in error. We have to continually re-appraise our convictions, to test their validity.

We have to do this because we are called to be faithful to Truth. More important, for us, than faithfulness to a particular doctrine of the holy, to any creeds or ideas, more important than faithfulness to humanity, or even to our friends and family, must be our faithfulness to truth. This notion is expressed somewhat clumsily in our fourth principle: the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Friends of mine, Unitarian Universalist ministers in Maryland, have developed a model of the seven principles for use in youth and young adult curriculum. They imagine an arch, with the first and seventh principles – the worth of each person and respect for the web of existence – as the cornerstones, the two bases of the arch. The fourth principle – the search for truth – is the keystone, the piece that holds the arch together and is at its pinnacle. I think that's right.

The Unitarian faith began with people who argued that the bible must be interpreted with reason. The Universalists began by saying that the truth of God's love was more important than other creeds. To be a person of integrity means to be faithful to truth, to speak the truth and live the truth in spite of incentives to do otherwise.

-- Matthew Johnson-Doyle

Focus Questions

What does integrity mean to you?

What things are so true that you must remain faithful to them?

What pressure do you feel to do otherwise?

Shared Reflections**Closing Words**

You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. (John 8)

Opening Words

*Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Where there is hatred let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is discord, union;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that we may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
-- St. Francis of Assisi*

Check-In / Sharing

Topic

And that fact, that we must feel ups and downs to be alive, that fact makes possible the good news of showing compassion to others. To show compassion, to feel-with, is at its core an affirmation of our humanity, it is why, even though I've been burned, I still want to live a life filled with compassion. I want to show compassion, scary as it is to do so, because I need compassion. I don't want to live with part of my soul closed off, with part of who I am held in check, waiting for a perfection which shall never arrive.

-- Matthew Johnson-Doyle

Focus Questions

What does compassion mean to you?
When has someone shown you compassion?
Is there someone you want to show compassion to?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

*May the Love which overcomes all differences
which heals all wounds,
which puts to flight all fears,
which reconciles all who are separated,
be in us and among us
now and always.
Fred Gillis*

Opening Words

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out for another is to risk exposing our true self.

To place our ideas – our dreams – before the crowd is to risk loss.

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To hope is to risk despair.

To try is to risk dying.

-- Anon.

Check-In / Sharing

Topic

Both the courage to say yes and the courage to say no come out of the same place, though – that commitment to something larger, that allegiance to a greater cause. We cannot serve the holy by spending our energy out on everything that comes our way, by forgetting what is our table and what isn't. And we cannot serve the holy by cowering in fear, by letting every setback determine our fate. We are called to something larger and greater than that. We are called to make a difference in the world, to live lives of integrity and compassion, and that calling requires of us the courage of our convictions, the courage of our purpose and our honesty.

For each of us, the challenge is different. Some of us are prone to rashness, some to cowardice. Either way, we have our work cut out for us. The good news is that the more we practice courage, the better we'll get at it. Aristotle argued that the virtues could be learned, they could become habit through regular exercise. By confronting our fears, we learn that they can be confronted. By showing compassion, we learn what compassion means. By living with integrity, we approach new challenges with righteousness.

Matthew Johnson-Doyle

Focus Questions

What are the things in your life that take courage to say yes to?

What are the things that take courage to say no to?

What is the grounding for your courage?

Was there some time in your life when you had to show more courage than you thought you had?

And you did it? Or you couldn't do it?

Shared Reflections

Closing Words

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard,

the path is never clear,

and the stakes are high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth.

You are not alone.

~ Wayne B. Arnason

U&I Topic 42 Writing Your Covenant

Opening Words

*Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its calling.
This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love, and to help one another.*

Check-In / Sharing

Topic

In many UU churches, what we call U&I groups are called covenant groups. The reason for that is that one of the most important things our groups do is make a covenant with each other. A covenant is a special kind of promise, it has a sacred dimension. Sometimes we have implicit covenants about how we will be with one another – but when there is a disagreement, an implicit covenant isn't always good enough.

Example Covenants can be found at:

<http://www.smallgroupministry.net/resources/covenants.html>

Focus Questions

Use the focus questions from Bob Hill's book (pages 39 and 40) to help the group write a covenant about how they will treat one another. *Write it down. At your next meeting, distribute a copy of the covenant to everyone.*

Closing Words

*May we leave this place
Seeking an uncharted and freely chosen way to wholeness
Knowing we have companions along the way.*

U&I Topic 43 Faith-Sharing

Opening Words

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it.

There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful.

Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.

-- Olympia Brown (1835-1926)

Check-In / Sharing

Topic / Questions

Some say that faith is belief in things unseen, that is assent to a proposition that cannot be proven. I disagree. Faith, to me, is about faithfulness – being committed to a higher good.

When I say that I am a person of faith, I mean that I am dedicated, at a soul-level, to cooperating with the mysterious divine to bring about the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, here on earth. Faith, at bottom, is an intuitive sense that we are part of a large web of life, that what we do matters, in the cosmic sense, and that we are not alone.

-- Matthew Johnson-Doyle

Take a moment to think of a story of when your faith helped you get through a challenge in your life, or when your faith was affirmed or challenged by something that happened to you. Think of what your faith meant to you in those moments. What does it mean to you to be a Unitarian Universalist, faithfully? Do you agree with the above definition of faith?

Now, tell your story. Share your faith with the group – as if this was a group of people who were not UU's, who were receptive, who asked you to say something about your faith.

Check-Out

What was that like?

Closing Words

Go out into the highways and by-ways.

Give the people something of your new vision.

You may possess a small light,
but uncover it, let it shine,
use it in order to bring more light and understanding
to the hearts and minds of men and women.

Give them not hell, but hope and courage;
preach the kindness and
everlasting love of God.

-- John Murray (1714-1815)

Topic 44 Sacred Listening

Opening Words

i was talking to myself again
in front of the mirror
but the glass man only
moved his lips with mine
and said nothing that would help

so i came to you to hear
what it was i had to tell myself
i chose you above everyone else
because i knew
that you would say

one can
only
help oneself

and that is exactly
the kind of smart-ass remark
i will not take
off a mirror

-- Ric Masten, "The Counselor"

Sharing / Check-In

Topic

Sacred listening is a way of hearing another person into speech. It is listening not just to what is said but what is felt, being present to another. You can tell when sacred listening is happening because no one rushes to fill the silent spaces in the conversation. What makes it sacred? Couldn't we just call it "deep listening" or something? Well, we could. But it is sacred, because it is in this deeper connection that it becomes possible for each of us to hear the wisdom of the holy, which lives within us all. Sacred listening allows the person who is speaking to hear, perhaps for the first time, their authentic selves.

Questions

Is there are person you go to when you need someone to help you hear yourself?

What is this experience like?

How does it feel to listen to another, and be fully present?

What makes it hard to do this?

Closing Words

Take courage friends.

*The way is often hard, the path is never clear,
and the stakes are high.*

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth.

You are not alone.

~ Wayne Arnason

“Topic” 45
Rituals for Beginning and Ending

Welcoming a New Member to your group:

Facilitator:

We arrive out of many singular rooms, walking over the branching streets. We come to be assured that brothers and sisters surround us, to restore their images on our eyes. We enlarge our voices in common speaking and singing . . . the warmth of their hands assures us, and the gladness of our spoken names. This is the reason of cities, of homes, of assemblies in the houses of worship. It is good to be with one another. – Kenneth Patton

“We welcome to our group _____. It is good to be with one another, and it good to welcome one more into our midst.”

Newcomer:

“I thank you for your welcome. I promise to bring my whole self to this group, to listen with heart, to journey together, and to share whatever wisdom I can.”

Group:

“We welcome you. We promise to welcome your whole self to this group, and bring ours, to listen to you with our hearts, to journey together, and to share whatever wisdom we can.”

Each person should share, in a sentence or two, what they enjoy most about this group, what it is that makes them come and gather together. The newcomer should share what they hope to get out of the group.

Unison:

*We are here to abet creation and to witness to is,
To notice each other’s beautiful face and complex nature
So that creation need not play to an empty house.*

-- Annie Dillard

Ritual to honor a departing member (or ending group)

Facilitator:

*What we call a beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*

*We shall not cease from our exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time
-- T.S. Eliot*

This is the last meeting of one among us (this group). We honor their presence with us and wish them well in their future journey.

Taking pieces of paper, each person should write down something they have appreciated about the exiting member of the group. Keep it brief and positive. Then each person should read what they have written. (If the group as a whole is ending, the comments should be about the group). The exiting member should keep the slips of paper.

The departing member may also say what they have appreciated about each person, or about the group as a whole.

Unison:

*Hold on to what is good
Even if it is
A handful of earth.*

*Hold on to what you believe
Even if it is
A tree which stands by itself.*

*Hold on to what you must do
Even if it is
A long way from here.*

*Hold on to my hand even when
I have gone away from you.
-- Nancy Wood*

Topic 46 Gossip

Opening Words: “If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, come sit next to me.”
~Alice Roosevelt Longworth

Check-in

Topic:

A definition of Gossip: Gossip is both the act of spreading news from person to person, especially rumors or private information, and the news spread through the act of gossiping. While this is one of the oldest and (still) the most common means of spreading and sharing information, it is also notorious for the introduction of errors and other variations into the information thus transmitted. The term also carries implications that the news so transmitted is of, usually, a personal or trivial nature.

[Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gossip]

Gossip is something we all have experience of. It is a form of communication that has been embraced by our cultures, starting in our schoolyards and continuing on to our senior years. Since it is so prevalent in our interactions it must serve a purpose or role. Yet it often causes harm or pain in its execution. As such we openly disparage and proclaim to reject the practice of gossiping. Thus far we do not seem to have found methods to stop gossip or transform it into healthy communication. Perhaps we do not have the inclination or the tools.

"Gossip is nature's telephone." ~ Sholom Aleichem (1859-1916) Russian author

“The Puritan's idea of hell is a place where everybody has to mind his own business.” ~Wendell Phillips, attributed

“Whoever gossips to you will gossip about you.” ~Spanish Proverb

“Show me someone who never gossips, and I'll show you someone who isn't interested in people.” ~Barbara Walters

“Gossip needn't be false to be evil - there's a lot of truth that shouldn't be passed around.”
~Frank A. Clark

Questions

- 1) Why do we gossip? What purpose does it serve?
- 2) Is all gossip negative? Can we gossip in a positive way?
- 3) Is gossip something that we can stop? What could we replace it with?
- 4) Is gossip a necessary part of human interactions?

Closing Words: "So live that you wouldn't be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip." ~ Will Rogers (1879-1935) American humorist & writer

(Topic by Kara Sweeney, UU Metro Atlanta North)

Topic 47
The 1st Principle

FIRST PRINCIPLE: We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person...

Opening Words

May every creature abound in well-being and peace.

May every living being, seen or unseen, those dwelling far off, those living near by, those already born, those waiting to be born,

May all attain inward peace...

Just as a mother, with her own life, protects her only child from hurt, so within yourself foster a limitless concern for every living creature.

Display a heart of boundless love for all the world in all its height and depth and broad extent,

Love unrestrained, without hate or enmity,

Then as you stand or walk, sit or lie, until overcome by drowsiness, devote your mind entirely to this: It is known as living the life divine. – Buddha

Check-in --

Discussion

Read the First Principle, above, and ask the following:

- What inspires and strengthens us to see the inherent worth and dignity of every person? When is it difficult to hold to this attitude of respect? What enables us to respect the worth and dignity of people when they are: irritating...boring... abusive to others...dressed shabbily...holding beliefs opposite to our own?
- What social realities tend to work against the First Principle, and what can we do to actively promote the First Principle in light of these?

Closing reading:

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations,

And inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity.

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings

But connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe,

To this community and to each other. –Anonymous

(Topic by Judy Morgan, UU Church of Washington Crossing)

SECOND PRINCIPLE: We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations...

Opening Words:

*Go in peace. Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves.
Act justly.
Speak justly.
Remember the depth of your own compassion.
Forget not your power in the days of your powerlessness.*

*Do not desire to be wealthier than your peers
And stint not your hand of charity.
Practice forbearance.
Speak the truth, or speak not.
Take care of yourselves as bodies, for you are a good gift.*

*Crave peace for all people in the world,
Beginning with yourselves,
And go as you go with the dream of that peace alive in your heart.
--Mark L. Belletini*

Check-in

Discussion

Read the Second Principle, above, and ask the following:

- What was a time that you strongly felt inequity or injustice, either for yourself or others? What could you or others have done to change that inequity? What was a time that you or someone else spoke or acted for justice in relationship in a way that made a difference?
- What strengthens and inspires us to feel compassion for those who are suffering from injustice or other cause of pain? Does compassion lead us automatically to, as the Buddhists say, “right action?”

Closing reading:

*Love cannot remain by itself—it has no meaning,
Love has to be put into action and that action is service.
Whatever form we are, able or disabled, rich or poor,
It is not how much we do,
But how much love we put in the doing;
A lifelong sharing of love with others. —Mother Teresa*

(Topic by Judy Morgan, UU Church of Washington Crossing)

Topic 49
The Third Principle

THIRD PRINCIPLE: We affirm and promote:
Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations

Opening Words:

It is not the number of books you read, nor the variety of sermons you hear, nor the amount of religious conversation in which you mix, but it is the frequency and earnestness with which you meditate on these things until the truth in them becomes your own and part of your being, that ensures your growth. - *Frederick William Robertson*

Check-in:

Sharing:

- What was a time when you felt accepted by an individual or community in a way that was important to you?
- How would you describe your own spiritual growth path and how can the community best support you in it?
- What can we as a community do better in encouraging acceptance and spiritual growth among our members?
- Is sharing our own personal spiritual insights a way to encourage spiritual growth in others? Is giving each other affirmation and appreciation an important part of encouraging growth?

Closing reading:

A human being is a part of the whole called by us "Universe." A part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest -- a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of acceptance to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. -- Albert Einstein

(Topic by Judy Morgan, UU Church of Washington Crossing)

Topic 50
The Fourth Principle

FOURTH PRINCIPLE: We affirm and promote:
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning

Opening Words

Truth resides in every human heart, and one has to search for it there, and to be guided by truth as one sees it. But no one has a right to coerce others to act according to his own view of truth. - *Mohandas. K. Gandhi*

Check-in

Topic

- Many suggest that the truth and meaning that people are searching for is God.
- G-o-d is just a symbol for what many call religious truth and meaning.
- What is it that distinguishes religious truth and meaning from the idolatrous, that is, from other parts of living?
- Religion, in part, is maintained because of dissatisfaction-when everything you always wanted isn't enough-arriving at this realization can be the starting point in religion.
- Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived...

Questions

What's an example of a way that you have participated in a search for truth and meaning that was important to you?

What in society encourages the search for truth and meaning, and what works against it?

What can we as a community do to more effectively support this principle?

Closing reading:

When we understand that man is the only animal who must create meaning, who must open a wedge into neutral nature, we already understand the essence of love. Love is the problem of an animal who must find life, create a dialogue with nature in order to experience his own being. - *Ernest Becker*

(Topic by Judy Morgan, UU Church of Washington Crossing)

Topic 51 The Fifth Principle

FIFTH PRINCIPLE: We affirm and promote: The Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process within our Congregation and in Society at Large

Opening Words:

...truth-sayers are deeply hated even when they do not constitute a real threat to the established order. The reason lies, I believe, in that by speaking the truth they mobilize the [psychological] resistance of those who repress it. To the latter, the truth is dangerous not only because it can threaten their power but because it shakes their whole conscious system of orientation, deprives them of their rationalizations, and might even force them to act differently. Only those who have experienced the process of becoming aware of important impulses that were repressed know the earthquakelike sense of bewilderment and confusion that occurs as a result. Not all people are willing to risk this adventure, lest of all those people who profit, at least for the moment, from being blind. -- [Erich Fromm](#)

Check-in

Topic:

Since many of the greatest thinkers throughout history have asserted that democracy is an inferior decision making system, why do we seem to accept democracy as the ideal form of governance?

- How is the “Right of Conscience” different from “vulgar relativism”, where **any** personal doctrine is accepted?
- The survival of our religious movement will always be in doubt, not from without but from within-people will be ready to abandon this approach for something that seems to promise greater certainty, greater assurance.
- Without a firm commitment to the right of every individual to freedom of thought and expression, democracy itself can degenerate into a tyranny of the majority.
- The democratic process is explicitly linked, *not to a social goal*, but to the protection of an individual right: freedom of conscience.

Questions:

What was a time that you spoke out on an issue of conscience, or were moved by someone else doing this? How did you feel?

How can we encourage expression of this principle in our community?

Closing Words:

Observance of customs and laws can very easily be a cloak for a lie so subtle that our fellow human beings are unable to detect it. It may help us to escape all criticism, we may even be able to deceive ourselves in the belief of our obvious righteousness. But deep down, below the surface of the average man's conscience, he hears a voice whispering, "There is something not right," no matter how much his rightness is supported by public opinion or by the moral code. - *Carl G. Jung, in the introduction to Frances G. Wickes' "Analysis der Kinderseele" (The Inner World of Childhood), 1931.*

(Topic by Judy Morgan, UU Church of Washington Crossing)

**SIXTH PRINCIPLE: We affirm and promote:
The Goal of World Community with Peace, Liberty, and Justice for All**

Opening Words:

"It's my conviction that the human race has entered a stage where we are all dependent on each other. No other country or nation should be regarded in total separation from another, let alone pitted against another. That's what our ...vocabulary calls internationalism and it means promoting universal human values. I have to tell you Americans that you've been pushing your American way of life for decades. You thought it was perfection itself, the ultimate achievement of human thought... There has to be a different approach... Americans have to be more modest in their desires. We have to stimulate human qualities in people rather than greed. One cannot force happiness, impose happiness on nations by imposing any kind of utopia on the [World Community]. We see that attempts are being made to impose this model on the [World Community] – an... Americanized model... This is not the way to go because this can only create conflict." - *Mikhail Gorbachev*

Check-in

Some Statements/Questions to Ponder

- How has your family been personally affected by war or other international problems resulting from the lack of a world community?
- What can we do in the HPCUU community to promote this principle?
- The inequities and injustices which afflict so much of the human race are the product of history and society, not of God or nature.
- Most "religious wars" aren't about religion: they are about power.
- What would be the first important step to achieving a World Community?
- Is a world community with peace, liberty, and justice only the dream of affluent people?

Closing Words:

"We have before us the opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order... where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind: peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law...when we are successful, and we will be, we have a real chance at this new world order... in which a credible United Nations can use its peacekeeping role to fulfill the promise and vision of the U.N.'s founders. Such is a world worthy of our ... children's future." - *President George H.W. Bush (1991)*

(Topic by Judy Morgan, UU Church of Washington Crossing)

**SEVENTH PRINCIPLE: We affirm and promote:
Respect for the Interdependent Web of All Existence of Which We Are a Part**

Opening Words:

"The Net of Indra is a profound and subtle metaphor for the structure of reality. Imagine a vast net; at each crossing point there is a jewel; each jewel is perfectly clear and reflects all the other jewels in the net, the way two mirrors placed opposite each other will reflect an image ad infinitum. The jewel in this metaphor stands for an individual being [*or an individual consciousness, cell or atom*]. Every jewel is intimately connected with all other jewels in the universe, and a change in one jewel means a change, however slight, in every other jewel." - *Stephen Mitchell, "The Enlightened Mind"*

Check-in

Topic

The seventh principle is a favorite for many Unitarian Universalists. It calls us not just to be good citizens of the planet, but also to a sense of wonder at the connect of all of life.

Questions:

What does the seventh principle mean to you?

Tell us about a spiritual experience you've had in the natural world.

All matter is stardust: how does that make you feel about your place in the scheme of things?

Closing Words:

My young brother asked forgiveness of the birds: it seems senseless, yet it is right, for all is like an ocean, all flows and connects; touch it in one place and it echoes at the other end of the world. Let it be madness to ask forgiveness of the birds, still it would be easier for the birds, and for a child, and for any animal near you, if you yourself were more gracious than you are now, if only by a drop, still it would be easier. All is like an ocean, I say to you. Tormented by universal love, you, too, would then start praying to the birds, as if in a sort of ecstasy, and entreat them to forgive you your sin. Cherish this ecstasy, however senseless it may seem to people. - *Fyodor Dostoevsky,*

(Topic by Judy Morgan, UU Church of Washington Crossing)

Opening Words

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.*

Reinhold Niebuhr

Check-In/Sharing

Topic

Addiction isn't just to things that are chemicals. We are addicted any time we engage in a destructive habit to cover over our fear or our sadness. When we take a shortcut to happiness, but wind up still feeling empty, that's addiction. Addiction has long, generational effects on relationships and families – and conquering an addiction can be the greatest moment of our lives.

Questions:

Is there in a history of addiction in your family history? How has that effected you?

Is there a fear or a sadness in your life that tempts addictive behavior?

What does it take to conquer an addiction?

Closing Words

To live in this world

You must be able

To do three things:

To love what is mortal,

To hold it

Against your bones knowing

Your own life depends on it;

And, when the time comes to let it go,

To let it go.

-- Mary Oliver

Opening Words

You need not think alike to love alike . . . sanctified reason is the lantern of faith . . . conscience will not be quieted by anything less than truth and justice . . . God is one (Egy As Isten). – Francis David

Check-In/Sharing

Topic

“What does it mean to be a Unitarian today? I suggest it means to believe in the unity of all that is, to use your reason in the context of freedom, and to hold a life of kindness and justice as the most important religious quality. Your opinion might be different – and that, my friends, would make you an excellent Unitarian.” – Matthew Johnson-Doyle

Questions

What does “the unity of all that is” mean to you?

What does your reason tell you about spirituality?

How does being a Unitarian change the way you live, the choices you make? Does it?

What does being a Unitarian mean to you?

Closing Words

*Go your ways,
knowing not the answers to all things,
yet seeking always the answer
to one more thing than you know.*

-- John W. Brigham

Opening Words

Go out into the highways and by-ways.
Give the people something of your new vision.

You may possess a small light,
but uncover it, let it shine,
use it in order to bring more light and understanding
to the hearts and minds of men and women.

Give them not hell, but hope and courage;
preach the kindness and
everlasting love of God.

-- John Murray (1714-1815)

Check-In/Sharing

Topic

The new Universalism is the remedy for our times, it is needed now like it has not been needed in a long time. In a world where so many are preaching division and hatred, don't we need a Universalism that preaches God's infinite love, not for some, but for all? . . . In a world where so many live without basic respect, without justice, with too little hope, don't we need a Universalism that says heaven is here on earth, that all men and women are brothers and sisters? . . . In a world where so many have closed their minds and their hearts, don't we need a Universalism that seems wisdom and truth in all the people of the world? . . . In a world where so many treat the earth as a trash can, dismiss science, and scoff at wonder, don't we need a Universalism that embraces all creation and lifts our eyes to the stars?

. . . What will Universalism look like in fifty years – I do not know. It will be different, I am sure. But it will still carry its simply, essential message: All is Holy. No Exceptions. You Included.

-- Matthew Johnson-Doyle

Questions

What does infinite love mean to you? Can you imagine it? Why?
Who is the hardest for you to see as your brother or sister? What would it take?
What does Universalism mean to you?

Closing Words

*May the Love which overcomes all differences
which heals all wounds,
which puts to flight all fears,
which reconciles all who are separated,
be in us and among us
now and always.*

~ Frederick E. Gillis