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Introduction

Thank you for volunteering to serve as a Chalice Circle Facilitator! Chalice circles strengthen and sustain our community in multiple ways.

- Chalice circles promote “Numerical Growth.” By providing opportunities for individual people to find friends, opportunities for growth, and emotional and spiritual support, the chalice circles help people get “hooked in” and feel a part of our community. They stay, they join, our congregation grows in numbers.

- Chalice circles promote “Organic Growth,” defined as the “task of building the community, fashioning the organizational structures, developing the processes and practices that result in a dependable, stable network of human relationships in which we can grow and from which we can make a difference.” (Loren Mead, More than Numbers, p. 60.) Because facilitators meet regularly with the minister, chalice circles are a key link in our communications. As a facilitator, you become a two-way bridge, bringing information from church leadership to the people in your group, and bringing concerns, feelings, pastoral issues, and other key information from the members of your group to the leadership, so that we can fine tune our ministries to best meet the needs of the largest number of people.

- Chalice circles promote “Incarnational Growth,” which comes as we live our values more fully. The primary institutional vehicle for Incarnational Growth are the service projects. Chalice Circles have done amazing things for our congregation, both by meeting internal needs, and by raising our public profile. Individual incarnational growth happens whenever an internal shift manifests in an external change of behavior.

- Chalice circles promote “Maturational Growth,” the progress that individual members make in their own faith journeys. Spiritual maturation happens at all stages of life, and involves a continual, spiral process of “deepening spirituality,” a capacity to be present to and find meaning in life’s ups and downs, and to affirm its essential sacredness, and “expansion of the spiritual imagination,” the ability to see life as a series of complex, interrelated choices, rather than as a black-and-white, yes-and-no, right-or-wrong march down a straight and narrow path. Chalice circles provide an accepting and caring atmosphere and opportunities for reflection, listening, and learning our way along that spiral process.

Of course, the hope is that all facilitators also experience personal growth and satisfaction, and have a lot of fun, too. Again, thank you for agreeing to serve!
How Chalice Circles Work

Here is the format for each Chalice Circle Covenant Group meeting:

**Opening Reading** *(1 minute)*: Something will be chosen that gathers the group together and creates sacred space. The reading will inspire a sense of shared values, and possibly allude to (though not introducing) the discussion topic. A Chalice is lighted. You can use the reading provided, find your own, or invite participants to take turns finding and sharing readings.

**Opening Check-In** *(20-30 minutes)*: Each person, in turn, speaks for a few minutes without interruption or cross talk about the concerns of his/her life – possible questions include, “What do you have on your mind today?” or “What do you need to leave behind for a couple of hours in order to be fully present?”

**The Discussion** *(45-60 minutes)*: With an emphasis on sharing and listening rather than debate, the group discusses a topic.

**The Business** *(5-10 minutes)*: The group makes plans for whatever service project it has committed itself to and/or tends to other logistical details.

**Closing Check-Out** *(5-10 minutes)*: Each person, in turn, speaks for 1 minute or less about how he/she is feeling as the meeting draws to an end. Good questions to ask are: Did you get to say what you wanted to say? Did the process within our group encourage or discourage your participation? Did you feel listened to? If the topic was a difficult one to discuss, what made it so?

**Closing Reading** *(1-2 minutes)*: Brief reading that sends people on their way and celebrates community, and possibly alludes to the discussion topic. Again, use the one provided, find another you like better, or invite group participation. The Chalice is extinguished.

At the first meeting, the group should discuss the covenant. It is not important to follow the suggested covenant (below), but it IS important to have a shared understanding. People must agree to abide by the covenant, and to hold themselves and one another accountable. When a new member joins the group, the covenant should be revisited. This serves to reinforce group norms within the group, as well as creating a sense of safety and trust.
Suggested Covenant

Together, we covenant to:

1. Attend each meeting, or contact the facilitator if we are unable to attend.
2. Begin and end on time, or let someone know if we need to be late or leave early.
3. Treat each other with respect and love—listening without interrupting, discussing without arguing, speaking our own truth without needing it to be the ONLY truth—in the context of a caring relationship. We do not have to think alike to love alike.
4. Ensure that all members participate equally and fully, and that sharing is held in confidence until and unless permission is given to share more widely.
5. Adopt a service project to benefit the church community or the larger community.
6. Actively recruit and welcome new members, and to divide when the group reaches 12 people (the empty chair is symbolic of this openness).
7. Share responsibility for our group’s health and value, by speaking up when we feel one of these covenants has been violated, or even revising these.

Discussion Tips

Chalice circles aren’t support groups or discussion groups. They fall somewhere in between; where they fall will depend primarily on the makeup of your particular group. Because some people are there for connection and other people are there for content, it’s important to keep a balance between personal sharing (check-in) and discussion. If there is a member in crisis, it may be right and appropriate to devote an entire session to offering support and caring.

On the other hand, it may be best to set a clear boundary: “I am so concerned for you, and I feel as if you need more support than we can give you right now. If it’s okay, we’re going to move on now, but after we’ve finished, let’s you and I sit down and I’ll help you get connected with the people who can give you the help you need. (Then follow through, by helping them make an appointment with the minister, connect with the Lay Pastoral Ministry Team, or contact the Caring Committee.)

We provide multiple discussion questions so that you can choose the one that will initiate the best conversation. There’s no need to answer them all! You can pick the questions that you think will jump-start the best discussion, you can read the questions and let people choose the questions to answer, either as individuals as a group, or you can make up questions on the fly. Trust your instincts as a facilitator.
The Service Project

Working together on a mutually agreed-upon service project is a key element of the chalice circle experience. Nothing bonds a group like working side by side.

Your group may want their project to benefit the wider community. Some of our chalice circles have formed partnerships with community organizations (e.g. El Centro de Familia, Port Orchard’s Family Kitchen, Relay for Life, etc.) Others have found particular projects to do (e.g. cleaning up trash along the side of the road, pulling ivy in a state park.)

Your group may prefer to help out the Fellowship. We certainly need all the help we can get! Some groups take on tasks around the fellowship (decorating for Celebration Sunday, cleaning up the Memorial Garden, hosting or leading a Sunday Service, helping with a mailing.)

Some groups decide to do multiple service projects over the course of the year. But if your group prefers to do only one, a tentative calendar might look like this:

October: Discuss the reasoning behind the service project. Invite people to think of possibilities.

November: Brainstorm list.

December: Let things “simmer.” The holidays are busy enough already.

January: Revisit the list. Narrow it down to 2-3 possibilities. Task people with researching the details of those possibilities.

February: Make the final determination. Schedule your service project for some time in the spring.

Though you are liable to have a group full of very busy people, don’t let this slide unless you absolutely must. Research has shown that the service component is a key element of successful small group ministries.
Trouble Shooting

The best place to bring any troubles or concerns is the monthly facilitator’s meeting. We typically begin these meetings by sharing how things are going in our respective circles. Common problems and solutions that may come up:

- If one person is dominating the conversation, be pro-active. Don’t be afraid to interrupt, kindly. “Joe, I really like what you’re saying, but I want to make sure we hear from everybody.”

- If someone says or does something inappropriate, speak up. “I am not okay with what just happened. I feel like we’re in violation of our covenant. Does anyone else feel that way?”

- If someone misses a meeting and doesn’t contact you within a couple of days, REACH OUT. They might have a crisis in their life and need support. “Hi, we missed you at our last chalice circle meeting. Is everything okay?”

- If your group is at 12 members and people don’t want to split, well, you’re not alone. Other groups have found creative solutions (meeting in the same building in two different rooms, for example.) But the bottom line is that it gets really hard to have a good conversation with more than 12 people. Make sure, when the group splits, that there are enough people in each group to feel “at home” and, perhaps, find opportunities for reunions.

Chalice Circle Shopping

Because chalice circles tend to vary a great deal depending on the people involved, newcomers need to be empowered to find a good ‘fit.’ As a facilitator, your responsibility is to help a newcomer get to the group, make them feel welcome, and then follow up with them before the next meeting to find out whether they’d like to join. If they are ready, THEN introduce the subject of the covenant.
Chalice Circle Sermons

In the past, one sermon a month has focused on the topics the chalice circles are discussing. This year, we’re trying something different. The worship calendar, our Children’s and Adult Religious Exploration classes, and the chalice circles will all be following roughly the same themes. The good news is that you don’t have to remember which sermon to make sure to get to—every Sunday Service should feed into your discussions in some way.

The challenge will be that there won’t be a natural, once-monthly opportunity to highlight the work of the chalice circles and invite additional participation. This means that Chalice Circle participants will need to be more pro-active about inviting newcomers to visit your circle.

Congregational Covenant and Vision

I’m giving you eighteen sessions rather than the usual twenty this year. In the fall, a Board-appointed task force is going to lead the congregation through a Covenanting process, and in the spring, the Board of Trustees is hoping to initiate a Visioning process as well. With input from the two groups who are leading those processes, I’ll put together two additional chalice circle sessions to work with the two identity questions that are at the heart of these two processes: “How do we want to be together?” and “What do we want to do together?” Appendix A is a draft of a session on covenanting. I should have the final version of the covenanting session at the first regular facilitators’ meeting, and the visioning session will probably be ready sometime in late winter/early spring.

Socializing!!

Some of our chalice circles like getting together a couple of times over the course of the year for a purely social occasion, and inviting the families. This is HIGHLY ENCOURAGED, schedules permitting.
Session 1: The Shape of Community

Opening 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 feeling 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 compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

-Albert Einstein

Questions for Discussion

1. Is it generally difficult or easy for you to find your way into new groups? What helps you to do so?
2. When did you first feel a part of the KUUF community?
3. Can you describe a time you had difficulty becoming part of a group? What it made it hard?
4. Can you describe a time you eased into a group? What it made it easy?
5. How do you normally respond when you hear someone in a group to which you belong voice an opinion with which you disagree?
6. Why did you choose to participate in small group ministry for the first time or again?
7. How can the group help you to feel this is your crowd? What are you willing to do to ensure others feel this is their crowd?

Closing Reading: Starhawk

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been — a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can 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 circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.
Session 2: The Stages of Community

Opening Reading: The Stages of Community Building as articulated by Scott Peck

Pseudocommunity
An initial state of "being nice". Pseudocommunity is characterized by politeness, conflict avoidance, and denial of individual differences. Let's be honest -- most of us can't keep this up for long. Eventually someone is going to speak up, speak out, and the dam breaks.

Chaos
In the stage of chaos, individual differences are aired, and the group tries to overcome them through misguided attempts to heal or to convert. Listening suffers, and emotions and frustration tend to run high. There are only two ways out of chaos: retreat into pseudocommunity (often through organization), or forward, through emptiness.

Emptiness
Emptiness refers to the process of recognizing and releasing the barriers (expectations, prejudices, the need to control) that hold us back from authentic communication with others, from being emotionally available to hear the voices of those around us. This is a period of going within, of searching ourselves and sharing our truths with the group. This process of "dying to the self" can make way for something remarkable to emerge.

Community
"In my defenselessness, my safety lies." In this stage, individuals accept others as they are, and are themselves accepted. Differences are no longer feared or ignored, but rather are celebrated. A deep sense of peace and joy characterizes the group.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do Peck's stages of community resonate for you? If not, why not?
2. When have you felt completely accepted, full of joy and peace?
3. What stage do you think your chalice circle has reached?
4. What stage do you think KUUF has reached?

Closing Reading: M. Scott Peck

There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community.
Session 3: Seeking Life's Deeper Meanings

Opening Reading:

Why does anybody tell a story? It does indeed have something to do with faith, faith that the universe has meaning, that our little human lives are not irrelevant, that what we choose or say or do matters, matters cosmically. —Madeleine L'Engle

Discussion Questions

1. What gives your life meaning?
2. Is it necessary for you to find meaning in life?
3. Does the universe have meaning?
4. Do you believe as does Madeleine L'Engle "that our little human lives are not irrelevant, that what we choose or say or do matters, matters cosmically?"
5. How do evil, tragedy, and disaster affect your sense of life's meaningfulness?
6. How do you restore your hold on meaning when it diminishes?

Closing Reading

Song of the Builders

On a summer morning
    I sat down
    on a hillside
    to think about God -

    a worthy pastime.
    Near me, I saw
    a single cricket;
    it was moving the grains of the hillside

    this way and that way. 
    How great was its energy, 
    how humble its effort. 
    Let us hope

    it will always be like this, 
    each of us going on 
    in our inexplicable ways 
    building the universe.

~ Mary Oliver ~
Session 4: What do we mean by “deeper”? 

Opening Reading: The Depths by Denise Levertov

When the white fog burns off, 
the abyss of everlasting light 
is revealed. The last cobwebs 
of fog in the 
black firtrees are flakes 
of white ash in the world's hearth.

Cold of the sea is counterpart 
to this great fire. Plunging 
out of the burning cold of ocean 
we enter an ocean of intense 
noon. Sacred salt 
sparkles on our bodies.

After mist has wrapped us again 
in fine wool, may the taste of salt 
recall to us the great depths about us.

Discussion Questions:

1. When you think back over the course of your life, what experience stands 
out as the most difficult to make sense of? Were you eventually able to do 
so?

2. Let's talk about aging. What do you think of when you think of growing 
older? How are you preparing to handle aging? What have you gained as 
you have aged, and what have you lost? What meaning is there in the 
aging process?

3. How about illness? What have you learned about your body and your 
spirit as you moved through physical challenges?

4. How often do you think about death? Does the fact that we're only here 
for a short while scare you, or inspire you to live life more fully?

5. Have you ever experienced a “Dark Night of the Soul”? What brought it 
about? What happened afterwards?

6. What other experiences have you had that made you dig deep...for 
strength, courage, faith, or power you weren’t sure you had?
Closing Reading: To Hear the Falling World by Jane Hirshfield

Only if I move my arm a certain way,
it comes back.
Or the way the light bends in the trees
this time of year,
so a scrap of sorrow, like a bird, lights on the heart.
I carry this in my body, seed
in an unswept corner, husk-encowled and seeming safe.
But they guard me, these small pains,
from growing sure
of myself and perhaps forgetting.
Session 5: Valuing Diversity

Opening Reading:

One of our most important tasks is to convince others that there's nothing to fear in differences; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian Universalist, but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one's own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination. - Adlai Stevenson

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of a situation where you felt surrounded by people who were just like you. What did it feel like? What were the gifts?
2. Think of a situation in which differences (of opinion, background, etc.) caused a break in relationship or community. What happened? What could you have done differently?
3. Think of a situation in which differences (of opinion, background, etc.) were seen as positive and useful. What happened then? How was this mindset cultivated?
4. Think of a situation where you were in the minority. How did that feel? How did you respond?

Closing Reading: Hosea Ballou

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.
Session 6: Incarnation

Opening Reading: Blessing, by Barbara Pescan

We spend so much time running from ourselves
Fleeing from what we know
About the goodness in our hearts
We think we can escape
The intelligence of our loving.

Imagine
You are standing before a bodhisattva—
Jesus, Buddha, the first mother
It does not matter what you call the holy one—
He has dust on his shoes
Chaff clings to her
The smells of being alive—
Shining from their faces is the beam of all their questions
The compassion of their living.

Can you see yourself through those eyes?
Can we know each other like this?
(We, who no longer believe in messias
Can hardly believe in each other.)

Can we
Know ourselves seen
And know each other this same way
Until our restless hearts
Learn to abide
In this knowing and this love?
Can we live in this gaze of blessing?

Discussion Questions:

1. Some Christians believe that Jesus was the sole incarnation of God. Though not every UU would choose these particular words, Unitarian Universalists believe that every person is “made in God’s image,” with the power to love more fully and help heal the world. Can you see yourself this way? Does it help you?

2. Who are the people you have the hardest time with? Say a name, and then finish the sentence with... “has inherent worth and dignity” or “is a child of God.” How does that feel? Can you say it and mean it?

3. An old folk tale has the abbot of a dying monastery go to a wise rabbi for advice. “How strange,” says the rabbi. “God came to me just the other day
and said that one of your number is the messiah!” Flush with new hope, the abbot returns and shares the news. Suddenly, the old, crotchety monks begin to treat each other with reverence...just in case the person they are talking to is the messiah. Some of them even begin to wonder if THEY are the messiah themselves, and act accordingly. The atmosphere in the monastery shifts profoundly. Visitors find they are treated with the same care, and so they stay. Soon the order is thriving again. Could this be the point of the “messiah” concept? To inspire us to treat one another this way?

Closing Reading:

**Namaste**

(Pronounced Nah-mah-stay) is a South Asian greeting originating in India, which is used when both hello and goodbye would be used in English. It is commonly accompanied by a slight bow made with the hands pressed together, palms touching, in front of the chest. This word can be taken to mean any of these:

- The Spirit in me meets the same Spirit in you.
- I greet that place where you and I are one.
- The Light of God in me salutes the Light of God in you.
- My higher energy salutes your higher energy.

In other words, it recognizes the equality of all, and pays honor to the sacredness and interconnection of all, as well as to the source of that interconnection.

Have each person look around with a “gaze of blessing” and say to every one in the circle, “Namaste.”
Session 7: Affirming the Worth of All Living Things

Opening Reading: “What sort of day?” by Glenn H. Turner

What sort of day was this?
Did you return home empty handed:
   arms full of groceries, the newspaper,
   empty gossip, work-weariness,
   worries about the economy, the weather,
   the high cost of gasoline?

What sort of day was this?
Was your heart’s basket filled:
   seeds for spring, flowers for the table,
   lunch with a good friend, a book of poems,
   a candle with a jasmine scent,
   something like a prayer for a child?

You rise, you eat, you go out each day.
Is each trip a pilgrimage:
   a hunger for connection, for service,
   for eye-food - a tree against the sky,
   deer in the woods, the sliver of a new moon -
   bringing a hope, an idea, a resolution?

This is about your soul, your body, your home.
What do you bring into it?

Discussion Questions:

2. What are the things you bring into your home? Into your life? How does this list compare to the list of things you value?
3. Bring to mind a moment when you felt a strong connection to life itself. Where were you? What did it feel like?
4. Are there any living things whose worth you would not affirm? For example, do mosquitoes have worth? If not, why not? If so, why?
5. Affirming the worth of living things can cause many reactions. Two of the most common are guilt (for the way human beings have negatively impacted the environment) and gratitude. Which do you find more appropriate? Which do you find more helpful?
The place I want to get back to
    is where
    in the pinewoods
    in the moments between
    the darkness
    and first light
    two deer
came walking down the hill
    and when they saw me
they said to each other, okay,
    this one is okay,
    let's see who she is
    and why she is sitting
    on the ground, like that,
    so quiet, as if
asleep, or in a dream,
    but, anyway, harmless;

    and so they come
    on their slender legs
    and gazed upon me
    not unlike the way
I go out to the dunes and look
    and look and look
    into the faces of the flowers;
    and then one of them leaned forward
and nuzzled my hand, and what can my life
    bring me that could exceed
    that brief moment?
For twenty years
I have gone every day to the same woods,
    not waiting, exactly, just lingering.
    Such gifts, bestowed,
can't be repeated.

If you want to talk about this
come to visit. I live in the house
near the corner, which I have named
Gratitude.
Session 8: The Global Society

Opening Reading: “Building the case for global living”

Imagine you are at a potluck buffet and see that you are the first in line. How do you know how much to take? Imagine that this potluck spread includes not just food and water, but also the materials needed for shelter, clothing, healthcare and education. It all looks and smells so good and you are hungry. What will you heap on your plate? How much is enough to leave for your neighbors behind you in the line? Now extend this cornucopia to today’s global economy, where the necessities for life come from around the world. Six [and a half] billion people, shoulder to shoulder, form a line that circles around the globe... With plates in hand, they too wait in line, hearty appetites in place. And along with them are giraffes and klipspringers, manatees and spiders, untold millions of species, millions of billions of unique beings, all with the same lusty appetites. And behind them, the soon-to-be-born children, cubs, and larvae.

A harmonious feast just might be possible. But it requires a bit of restraint, or shall we say, a tamed appetite, as our plate becomes a shopping cart, becomes a pickup truck – filling our home, attic, basement, garage, and maybe even a rented storage unit with nature transformed into things. As we sit down for a good hearty meal with new friends and creatures from around the world, what is the level of equity that we would feel good about? At what level of inequity would we say, “Wait a minute, that’s not fair?”

Source: Radical Simplicity, by Jim Merkel

Discussion Questions:

1. What are your feelings and thoughts as you are standing at the head of this symbolic buffet line, contemplating how to fill your plate? What does the term “global living” mean to you?
2. Do you find yourself mostly aware or mostly unaware of your symbolic helping, and how it relates proportionally to the helping of the rest of the people and beings in line?
3. Here in the United States, people must pay a premium for meat which is raised (and killed) humanely, vegetables which are grown sustainably, and products which are made with special care. In this way, do you think the worth of the plants and animals that are the source of our food and the people who make it are reflected monetarily?
4. How do you feel about the influx of inexpensive hand-made products from third world countries?
Closing Readings:

I believe that to meet the challenges of our times, human beings will have to develop a greater sense of universal responsibility. Each of us must learn to work not just for oneself, one’s own family or nation, but for the benefit of all humankind. Universal responsibility is the key to human survival. It is the best foundation for world peace.

—His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Wendell Berry

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little 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 life,
Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments
Session 9: Speaking Truth in Love
(Adapted from a session plan on Truth by Bill Peresta, Channing Church, Newport, RI)

Opening Words:

- Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it. – André Gide
- Most truths are so naked that people feel sorry for them and cover them up, at least a little bit. – Edward R. Murrow
- Some minds remain open long enough for the truth not only to enter but to pass on through by way of a ready exit without pausing anywhere along the route. – Elizabeth Kenny
- In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act. – George Orwell
- The truth will set you free. But first, it will piss you off. – Gloria Steinem
- The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie -- deliberate, contrived and dishonest -- but the myth -- persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. – John F. Kennedy

Discussion Questions

1. What is your view of “truth”? Do you see it as “absolute”, i.e., the same for everyone; or “relative”, i.e., depends on the situation or the observer?
2. Was there a time in your life when knowing, or telling, the truth was important?
3. How is it possible that two people can define truth is conflicting ways and both be correct?
4. If truth is relative and not the same for everyone, how can people ever hope to agree on anything? How can we ever hope to live together in peace and harmony?
5. What role do you think religion plays in presenting, or unfolding, the truth?
Closing Reading: “The Place Where We Are Right” by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.
Session 10: Gossip
(Adapted from a session plan by Kara Sweeney, Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North (UUMAN) - May 2005)

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

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 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

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do we gossip? What purpose does it serve?
2. Is all gossip negative? Can we gossip in a positive way?
3. Can gossiping express or demonstrate love?
4. Is gossip something that we can stop? What could we replace it with?
5. Is gossip a necessary part of human interactions?

Closing Quote:

Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind. ~Henry James
Session 11: Acting for Justice

Opening Reading: Carter Heyward

Love creates righteousness, or justice, here on earth. To make love is to make justice. As advocates and activists for justice know, loving involves struggle, resistance, risk. People working today on behalf of women, blacks, lesbians and gay men, the aging, the poor in this country and elsewhere know that making justice is not a warm, fuzzy experience...

I think also that sexual lovers and good friends know that the most compelling relationships demand hard work, patience, and a willingness to endure tensions and anxiety in creating mutually empowering bonds. For this reason loving involves commitment...

Love is a choice -- not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity -- a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the ways in which love has created justice in your life?
2. Think about a time when you did something that made a difference in the world. What were you feeling? What motivated you to act?
3. Do you ever feel hopeless, helpless, or apathetic? What do you do when you feel that way?
4. “Love is a conversion to humanity...” Is it, perhaps, the ability to understand the impact our actions have on others and on the world that separates human beings from other animals?
5. Based on what you have seen in your lifetime, do you agree Martin Luther King, Jr. who said that “The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice”?

Closing Reading:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

-Margaret Mead
Session 12: Justice and Democracy in the United States

Opening Readings:

"Democracy is just a word. You have to give it meaning. The US is not a democracy. Most Americans do not vote. We haven't had a real choice for a long, long time now. Wealth rules. Corporations rule. The US is a plutocracy -- government by wealthy people. Certain people control multinational corporations. You couldn't get elected in the US without lots of money."

-Ramsey Clark

"We can have a democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both."

-Justice Louis D. Brandeis

“The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within.”

-Mahatma Ghandi

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you feel about the state of democracy in the U.S. today? Do you agree or disagree with the perspective presented by Clark and Brandeis?
2. Do you believe Democracy is the best political system to create a just and peaceful world? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel our current legal system serves us well?
4. Do you feel the hopes of the founding fathers have been met? If not, where did we go wrong?
5. What practical, positive steps can we take to help fix what’s wrong and strengthen the parts of the legal and political system that work?

Closing Reading: “Let’s Remake the World” by Gregory Orr

Let's remake the world with words.
   Not frivolously, nor
   To hide from what we fear,
   But with a purpose.
   Let's,
   As Wordsworth said, remove
   "The dust of custom" so things
   Shine again, each object arrayed
   In its robe of original light.

   And then we'll see the world
   As if for the first time.
   As once we gazed at the beloved
   Who was gazing at us.
Session 13: Growing in Spirit
(Adapted from a session plan by Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman)

Opening Words: We are here to grow in wisdom and learn how to love better. As we do this in our own ways, we slowly become a blessing to those around us and a light to the world. -Rachel Naomi Remen

Some Definitions of Spiritual Growth:

"By spiritual, I mean the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and much more trustworthy than our egos— with our own, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, and with the mystery of being alive." —Parker Palmer

The Buddhist path upholds three treasures, or "jewels,
- Buddha (ultimate example of Enlightenment)
- Dharma (written and spoken teachings)
- Sangha (Buddhist community)

Henri Nouwen, in his book on Christian spiritual direction outlines three practices:
- The discipline of the Heart (connecting with God through contemplative prayer)
- The discipline of the Book (reading, studying and following the Bible)
- The discipline of the Church (community of faith).

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways do you connect with the sacred?
2. What teachings do you read, study or follow for inspiration and guidance?
3. Why is community important for spiritual growth?
4. How can this group encourage your spiritual growth?

Closing Words: Expect to see more light in what you’ve understood; more beauty in all you still admire; more truth in all you’ve long believed; more goodness in all you’ve learned to love. —Gerhard E. Frost
Session 14: To Everything there is a Season

Opening Words: from Mary Oliver’s essay, “Winter Hours”

When I came to a teachable age, I was, as most youngsters are, directed toward the acquisition of knowledge, meaning not so much ideas but demonstrated facts. Education as I knew it was made up of such a pre-established collection of certainties. Knowledge has entertained me and it has shaped me and it has failed me. Something in me still starves. In what is probably the most serious inquiry of my life, I have begun to look past reason, past the provable, in other directions. Now I think there is only one subject worth my attention and that is the recognition of the spiritual side of the world and, within this recognition, the condition of my own spiritual state...

For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple. Under the trees, along the pale slopes of sand, I walk in ascendant relationship to rapture, and with words I celebrate this rapture...Insofar as one can, I put aside ego and vanity, and even intention. I listen. What I hear is almost a voice, almost a language. It is a second ocean, rising, singing into one’s ear, or deep inside the ears, whispering in the recesses where one is less oneself than a part of some single indivisible community.

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe a spiritual experience, a time when you heard the ‘still, small voice.’ Did you listen to it? Did you obey it?
2. Sharon Salzberg, in her book Faith writes, “While beliefs come to us from outside—from another person or a tradition or a heritage—faith comes from WITHIN, from our alive participation in the process of discovery.” In other words, faith is something that grows in us, in response to the realities of life. What experiences do you have of keeping or finding faith in dark times?
3. Do you base your decisions on facts, or on faith? Why?
4. Have you ever taken a leap of faith? What happened?
5. When we look to the natural world, we see that there are times for new growth, times to rest in the dark, to put down roots, to go dormant, and times to lay fallow...what season is it for you?
Closing Reading: “Come Out of the Dark Earth” by May Sarton

Come out of the dark earth Here where the minerals
    Glow in their stone cells
Deeper than the seed or birth.
    Come into the pure air
    Above all heaviness
    Of storm and cloud to this
Light possessed atmosphere.
    Come into
    out of
    under

The earth, the wave, the air.
Love touch us everywhere with primeval candor.
Session 15: Caring for the Earth

Opening Reading:

And Man created the plastic bag and the tin and aluminum can and the cellophane wrapper and the paper plate, and this was good because Man could then take his automobile and buy all his food in one place and He could save that which was good to eat in the refrigerator and throw away that which had no further use. And soon the earth was covered with plastic bags and aluminum cans and paper plates and disposable bottles and there was nowhere to sit down or walk, and Man shook his head and cried: "Look at this Godawful mess."

-Art Buchwald, 1970

Discussion Questions:

1. We are in the midst of a sea change, as more and more people become aware of environmental crises. What are your favorite signs of what David Korten calls, "The Great Turning"?
2. Think about your own life. What are the barriers that keep you from being as green as you might like? What are the societal forces that get in the way? What about your personal, emotional reactions?
3. Do you think there are differences that are dependent on socio-economic status with regard to attitudes about conservation and ecology? In other words, is being green the privilege of the rich and well educated?
4. What is the difference between caring "about" the earth and caring "for" the earth?
Closing Reading: "The Gardener of Eden" by James Broughton

I am the old dreamer who never sleeps
I am timekeeper of the timeless dance
I preserve the long rhythms of the earth
and fertilize the rounds of desire

In my evergreen arboretum
I raise flowering hopes for the world
I plant seeds of perennial affection
and wait for their passionate bloom

Would you welcome that sight if you saw it?
Revalue the view you have lost?
Could you wake to the innocent morning
and follow the risks of your heart?

Every day I grow a dream in my garden
where the beds are laid out for love
When will you come to embrace it
and join in the joy of the dance?
Session 16: A Theology of Ecology

Opening Words:

“When the seventh principle “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” was quickly and easily added to the other principles being adopted by the UUA, Unitarian Universalists were putting in place the seeds of a radical new cosmological worldview that broke away from the western theologies that placed humans as somehow apart from, superior to, the rest of creation- a attitude that has contributed directly to our present planetary crisis.

If we are to heal our suffering planet and respond justly and compassionately to the inevitable chaos that climate change is bringing, it seems very clear that we need a rapid evolutionary leap in consciousness. UU’s can help lead the way by growing the seed of our seventh principle into a new cosmology that transcends the world’s present traditional theologies and becomes a new universal story grounded in what our wondrous human brains have enabled us to learn about the age old questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? and Why are we here?

-UU Ministry for Earth Newsletter, Spring 2008 Issue

Discussion Questions:

1. How would you re-write the Genesis story, knowing what you know about evolution and the origins of the universe?
2. When you think about the “interdependent web”, about biodiversity and the complexity of life, what feelings does it evoke?
3. Do you think human beings have evolved to fulfill a specific purpose? If so, what is it?
5. What basic understandings to people need to have if we’re to “respond justly and compassionately to the inevitable chaos that climate change is bringing”?

Closing Reading: from “Hope” by Czeslaw Milosz

Hope is with you when you believe
The earth is not a dream but living flesh,
That sight, touch, and hearing do not lie,
That all things you have ever seen here
Are like a garden looked at from a gate.

You cannot enter. But you're sure it's there.
Could we but look more clearly and wisely
We might discover somewhere in the garden
A strange new flower and an unnamed star.
Session 17: Celebrating the Creative Spirit

Opening Reading: “Mindful” by Mary Oliver

Every day
I see or hear
something
that more or less

kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

in the haystack
of light.
It was what I was born for -
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world -
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant -
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise
with such teachings
as these -
the untrimmable light
of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the things that “more or less kill you with delight?”
2. What makes you happiest? When in your life have you felt most fulfilled?
3. How do you like to celebrate?
4. When do you feel most loved, supported, and appreciated?
5. Do you experience the universe, God(d aess), or the creative spirit as loving,
supportive and appreciative presence?
6. When is the last time you danced?

Closing Reading: “We are the Guardians of His Beauty” by Hafiz

We are the guardians of His Beauty.
We are the protectors
Of the Sun.

There is only one reason
We have followed God into this world:

To encourage laughter, freedom, dance
And love.

... 

Every man, plant and creature in Existence,
Every woman, child, vein and note
Is a servant of our Beloved -

A harbinger of joy,
The harbinger of
Light.
Session 18: Saying Goodbye (for now)

Opening Reading: from Charlotte's Web by E. B. White

Charlotte: You have been my friend. That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that.

Discussion Questions:

1. To say goodbye, we say thank you. What would you like to thank each other for?
2. What are some of the gifts you received from Chalice Circle this year?
3. What was your favorite moment?
4. What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about each other?
5. What are the gifts you have given this year that you are proudest of? Who did you give them to?
6. What are your plans for the summer?

Closing Reading: "Unison Benediction" by May Sarton

Return to the most human,
nothing less will nourish the torn spirit,
the bewildered heart,
the angry mind:
and from the ultimate duress,
pierced with the breath of anguish,
speak of love.

Return, return to the deep sources,
nothing less will teach the stiff hands a new way to serve,
to carve into our lives the forms of tenderness
and still that ancient necessary pain preserve.

Return to the most human,
nothing less will teach the angry spirit,
the bewildered heart;
the torn mind,
to accept the whole of its duress,
and pierced with anguish…
at last, act for love.
Appendix A: Boundaries vs. Barriers (Congregational Covenant)

Introduction:

Unlike most other chalice circle sessions, my hope is that the content of this discussion will be recorded in some fashion, so that it can be incorporated into the congregational covenanting process. One way is to ask people to write down their answers to these questions. Another way would be for somebody to take notes. Please make sure that the group agrees to this ahead of time, and decides whether or not they’d prefer to give their input anonymously. Thank you for helping support this important congregational process!

Opening Reading: Pema Chodron (abridged)

Let me address this question of: What's the difference between dissolving barriers and setting good boundaries?

Good boundaries allow for communication to happen. Barriers shut down communication.

To set good boundaries takes a lot of courage. You have to be going through this process of acknowledging your pain, and what triggers you, and acknowledging how much you can handle and how much you can't handle. The intention is to make communication clearer. Setting good boundaries is the most compassionate thing you can do for the other person and for yourself.

It's frightening because the other person is often not going to want to hear what you have to say—and they're going to get angry with you. You can always say, this doesn't work for me, I have to go—or you can decide to stay and work with it.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think about a time when you were able to share deeply as part of a community. What were the factors that helped you develop a sense of trust?
2. Think about a time when you felt unsafe, or shut down in a group. What happened? What were the behaviors that kept you from expressing yourself fully? From feeling safe?
3. Your chalice circle has a covenant. In light of the first two questions, are there any additions, deletions, or changes you would like to make to your covenant?
4. This is the current Congregational Covenant of Right Relations:

As a diverse faith community, we recognize both the importance and the challenges of staying in right relationship with one another. Believing that we need not think alike to love alike, we strive to:

- Speak with honesty, care and respect.
- Listen with open minds and hearts.
- Take responsibility for our own reactions, and share those reactions in constructive rather than destructive ways by speaking directly to the person involved.
- Focus on issues and behaviors rather than people or personalities.
- Practice forgiveness, of ourselves and one another.

In light of this conversation, do you feel this covenant is adequate? What additions, deletions, or changes would you suggest?

5. Do you believe covenants like these help to develop trust and strengthen communities?

**Closing Reading: The Rev. Marc Belletini**

To make a covenant with each other, to pledge some specific commitment of behavior and shared approach, however brief, is to take ourselves seriously as a community as a powerful and rooted religious contribution to Western thought and practice; it’s to point out that the reason that the ball whirling around at the end of the string does not go flying off into space is because of the string connected to the center, the centripetal force that makes for beloved community which is shelter and solace for our individual spiritual ways.