

## Welcoming New Members

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*Hospitality*, defined as *the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers*, comfortably stretches beyond the confines of gender to any Unitarian Universalist, although our "Namely Women" Small Group is indeed an all-womens' group. As the current group facilitator, I would punctuate that too often the rituals and ceremonies associated with welcoming—meals, letters, gifts, tokens of appreciation—have been linked to women. Enlisting all the magic of the Wise Women, Men, and Children through the ages to celebrate the many forms of hospitality available to us in our UU Small Groups, I invite you to consider ways to welcome new members into your Covenant Group by sharing what has been useful for our group.

Our small group, as well as several others in the congregation, have found the covenant below useful, grounding, and transcendent as good rituals can be. We honor the unknown author each month by reciting this covenant together. Periodically I alter the form—read together, individuals read different sections, one person reads while others listen—so that the message is "sung" a bit differently even while the words remain clearly articulated each time we meet:

*I will listen with my heart; I will speak from my heart.  
If I don't feel like speaking, I have the right to pass.  
What is said here stays here; I will respect confidentiality.  
I will not treat this as group therapy, although our time together is therapeutic.  
I will allow others to speak without interruption.  
I will not give unasked for advice.  
I will allow space for everyone who wishes to speak.  
I will treat other peoples' situations with respect, not treating them lightly.  
I will honor the diversity of thought and feeling and values among us.  
I will honor the times for reflection and quietness.  
I will speak from my heart and I will listen with my heart.*

To welcome a new small group member, I contact the person and arrange to meet with her at a local restaurant. I then email to her the poem "Listening" by Mary-Elizabeth Cotton [published in the Spring 2014 *SGM Journal*] and New Member Information that includes the group name, meeting schedule, leader and member names and contact information, and a list of past topics. I attach a couple of previous sessions as examples, plus a link to *Basic Elements of Small Groups* on the UU SGM Network website (<http://www.smallgroupministry.net/basicelements.html>). *Basic Elements* provides useful background, prompts questions, and directs our conversation when we meet for the first time. Because we all need to feel safe as we listen to each other and share our stories, the concepts of Confidentiality, Covenant, and Deep Listening are carefully reviewed.

I choose to meet with new members before they participate in a first group to entertain questions and deepen understanding of the concepts and the culture of a UU Small Group. My sense from current small group members is that they too feel safe knowing that new members have been prepared in this way.

Opening the door to group participation welcomes new members while modeling and reassuring current members who appreciate knowing that basic group norms have been shared even as we continue to grow month to month into a new group. As Rumi begins his poem "The Guest-House",

*(t)his being human is a guest-house, every morning a new arrival. And as he concludes, Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.* Small Groups offer us an opportunity through deeply listening to connect with our commonalities and differences as we awaken our spiritual lives together.