



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network

ANIMALS -THEIR EFFECT ON OUR LIVES

Small Group Conversations, Anne Bailey coordinator

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(TOPIC READINGS start on p. 4)

OUR SMALL GROUP MISSION

These Small Group conversations are offered as a way to get to know each other better, as we explore the various topics selected by our Small Group Team, related to our life experiences, questions, joys, and challenges. We are free to share our thoughts and feelings, joys and struggles, as we choose, and are here to listen to and care about each other. (We are NOT here to be a therapy group ~ or to tackle “church politics”!)

We look forward to building closer connections with each other, as we spend this time together, and form new or deeper friendships and build our sense of community.

OUR SMALL GROUP COVENANT

As members of this Small Group of the Universalist Church, we covenant with each other to help make this experience both personally and spiritually rewarding, to nourish our sense of community, and to learn and practice right relationship.

We will try to arrive before the beginning of each session so that it can start on time. We will try to attend all of the meetings of our group unless we are ill or away, and will let the group know in advance when that will occur or by contacting the facilitator:

Facilitator Contact information:

We use these guidelines for sharing, as a pathway to a caring community:

- We will deeply listen and ask honest and open questions.
- We will respect confidentiality. What is said here stays here, unless we agree to share something outside of our group.
- We will allow others to speak without interruption.
- We will not try to fix, save, advise or correct.
- We will honor time for reflection and quietness and respect a member’s right to remain silent, as they choose.
- We will treat others with respect and without judgment.
- We will honor the diversity of thought and feeling and values among us.

CHECK IN

Check-in is a time to deepen our connections with each other by sharing joys, sorrows, challenges, and changes in our lives. Sharing is not required. Only share if you are comfortable. What is shared in group is confidential.

Connection is the energy created between people when they feel seen, heard, valued and understood. One of the goals of small group is to move out of our heads and into our hearts in order to deepen our connections with one other.

Authentic sharing from a place of honesty and vulnerability allows us to build a community of trust, caring, and belonging. The connections we build with one another become contagious. They grow and spread and infuse our larger church community with life and vitality.

1. WELCOME / INTRODUCTIONS :

Let's remember to **Silence cell phones! Speak up clearly, so all can hear.**

Remind folks to let us know and to remind us if they have a hearing issue or if we aren't speaking up enough, so we can be aware.

• At FIRST SESSION of the series: Let's introduce ourselves:

"Tell us a bit about yourself, for example:"

- Your name, where you live and how long you've been in this area
- How long have you been a UU, coming to our church
- Your family, what you do (or did) for work, any special passions or hobbies
(Model this by starting with yourself.)

Distribute MISSION/COVENANT/CHECK IN handout.

- Read the MISSION statement orally - volunteers read COVENANT
- Remind folks to contact the facilitator if you are unable to come to a session (if not included, give them your contact info. to add to their copy)
- Read the CHECK-IN orally, in turn.
- "Since time has been spent on introductions today (tonight), we'll keep our check-in short"; ex. "Might you have a joy or feeling of gratitude you can share with us?"

2. CHECK IN: (at 2nd and later sessions: repeat names again, if needed, and read the following aloud, as you choose):

Check-in is a time to deepen our connections with each other by sharing joys, sorrows, challenges, and changes in our lives. Sharing is not required. Only share if you are comfortable. What is shared in group is confidential.

Some CHECK-IN PROMPTS:

- *How have these past couple of weeks gone for you?*
- *Can you share some of your "highs" and/or "lows"?*
- *Has anything brought you a sense of gratitude or accomplishment? - of joy - or sorrow?*

3. OPENING: Use "chime" or bell to quiet folks; LIGHT CANDLE:

(3 reading choices below, you might vary this from session to session)

- *May "our separate fires kindle one flame" as we gather in this circle—bringing our stories, our reflections, our hopes and our struggles.
May our candle flame lend light and promise for our time together.*
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- *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.*  
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- *May our time together bring learning, understanding, compassion, encouragement, and hope as we share about our life journeys and passions.*

4. CENTERING: *In preparation for our conversation, let's take a few moments to center ourselves and be thankful for this time we have together in community.*

Please get comfortable, place both feet solidly on the floor, rest your hands on your thighs and let your shoulders drop. Gently close your eyes or focus on a spot a few feet in front of you on the floor. Bring your attention to the flow of your breath.

*Breathing in I calm my body.
Breathing out I smile.*

*Dwelling in this present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment.*

Our life's path is not one we travel alone. We are in it together, and the company of spiritual friends helps us feel our interconnectedness.

Ring the chime: *"Slowly open your eyes."*

5. DISTRIBUTE READING:

Ask for **volunteers to read the paragraphs aloud, in turn.** You might include a **pause after the reading**, to allow time to reflect before responding.

6. POSE QUESTIONS to prompt sharing, invite folks to respond if and as they choose; If you choose, you can **split readings into sections**, with questions/conversation as you go along (some readings are already done this way).

Encourage silent spaces between reflections; be comfortable with silence.

You might prompt: **"Take some time to think about that."** - or the like.

FEEL FREE TO ADJUST or ADAPT THE QUESTIONS PROVIDED

You may not get to all of them, or you may want to modify them slightly or skip around a bit, even make up a new question, depending on what comes up in the conversation, to keep it moving along.

KEEPING YOUR GROUP ON TRACK: If a group member should go on and on, or responds inappropriately so that **conversation needs redirection**, gently ask that they give others an opportunity to share or say something like:

- **"Let's reconsider the question"**
- **"Let's stop now and take a moment to reflect."**
- **"Thank you for sharing your thoughts. Now let's move on".**

You can also make reference to the covenant.

(If you are co-facilitating, work out a collaboration system with your partner, such as: when the other is facilitating, feel free to help guide the conversation, step in if you see a need to redirect.)

If the conversation has slowed down, you as facilitator can model responses to help the conversation along. **Some prompts could be:**

- **What are your thoughts about that?**
- **How does it make you feel?**
- **Can you say more about that?**
- **What does it make you think of?**

If the topic is really not going well, turn it back to the group:

- **"What do you want to do with this topic?"**

NOTE: Ask participants to bring in a favorite animal memento - photo, carving, stuffed animal, etc. that they may have.

ANIMALS - Their Effect on Our Lives

Animals, referred to by John Muir as our horizontal (siblings), have long been recognized as essential to our development and well-being. Throughout history they have played a major role in human thought and culture. They inhabit our myths, fables, proverbs and stories. There is a profound, inescapable need for animals among all peoples, for while animals have inhabited a world without people, we have never lived without the companionship, example and practical help of animals. ~ *Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, Earth Prayers.*

How it is that animals understand things I do not know, but it is certain that they do understand. Perhaps there is a language which is not made of words and everything in the world understands it. Perhaps there is a soul hidden in everything and it can always speak, without even making a sound, to another soul. ~ *Frances Hodgson Burnett*

“Animals are such agreeable friends—they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms.”
~ *George Eliot*

Animals are living souls. They are not things. They are not objects. Neither are they human. Yet they mourn. They love. They dance. They suffer. They know the peaks and chasms of being ... In a wonderful and inexpressible way, therefore, God is present in all creatures. ~ *Rev. Gary Kowalski*

I like pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals.
- *Sir Winston Churchill*

I think dogs are the most amazing creatures; they give unconditional love. For me they are the role model for being alive. - *Gilda Radner*

The most affectionate creature in the world is a wet dog. - *Ambrose Bierce*

If a dog will not come to you after having looked you in the face, you should go home and examine your conscience. - *Woodrow Wilson*

QUESTIONS: (continued on next page):

Our relationship with animals today is complicated and has many dimensions: emotional, ethical, social, spiritual, scientific, and more. We love animals, we live with them, we use them, we work together, we play together, we eat them, we find sport in them, we protect them, they protect us, we learn from them, we eliminate those that get in our way, we mourn their deaths. We wonder and argue mightily over the ways to be in right relationship with animals.

- In this "web of all existence, of which we are a part," what part do animals play for you?
- Share some stories of experiences you have had with animals: positive, negative, funny or sad. Share the memento you brought, what it means to you.
- Describe relationships you have had with animals of other species, including those who share your home and those outside your immediate world, in the wild, or in crisis.

- If you could be an animal, what would you be? Why? Have people ever compared you to an animal? For what reasons?
- Have you ever had what you would call a spiritual experience with an animal? What was it? What was spiritual about it for you? Do you have a "totem" animal, an animal that has a special meaning for you, to which you are drawn, or that symbolizes something important for you?
- What does losing a pet teach us about life and death? What is unique about the pain of losing a pet? How is it different from losing a family member or friend?

READINGS SET 2

Kindness and compassion towards all living beings is a mark of a civilized society. Racism, economic deprivation, dog fighting and cock fighting, bullfighting and rodeos are all cut from the same defective fabric: violence. Only when we have become nonviolent towards all life will we have learned to live well ourselves. ~ *Cesar Chavez*

The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated. ~ *Mahatma Gandhi*

"I ask people why they have deer heads on their walls. They always say because it's such a beautiful animal. There you go. I think my mother is attractive, but I have photographs of her." ~ *Ellen DeGeneres*

"If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men."
~ *Francis of Assisi*

If reason and morality are what set humans apart from animals, then reason and morality must always guide us in how we treat them. ~ *Matthew Scully*

He who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men. We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals. - *Immanuel Kant*

When we truly learn to suffer with other creatures and accept our intimate connection with all beings we will begin to end exploitation, violence, war, racism, hatred, and oppression. The ethical treatment of animals is a natural and inevitable part of acting from a place of compassion." ~ *Rev. Peter Morales*

Any society which does not insist upon respect for all life must necessarily decay.
~ *Albert Einstein*

QUESTIONS: (continued on next page):

The way we interact and care for animals reflects our deepest nature. What does caring for a pet or animal teach us about ourselves, about how we should treat others and the world around us?

- Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (Genesis 1.26) How does your concept of how humans should relate to animals diverge from this passage, or does it?

- Are there things you do or do not do regarding animals for ethical reasons? Tell us about them, and share your ethical understandings. (Examples: eating, wearing, sports, zoos & aquariums, medical re- search, boycotting certain products, hunting)

As CONVERSATION comes to an end, you might ask for **last thoughts on the topic**:

“Do you have a thought from this conversation that you will carry home with you?”

CLOSING: Ask volunteer who brought a Closing, to read it to the group.

RING CHIME and EXTINGUISH CANDLE (Choose one of these or one of your choice):

As our time together comes to a close, we give thanks for one another, for the chance to share our lives, and to renew our spirits in the company of friends. May we go forth enriched by our gathering, committed to living life fully, to loving life with more passion, and to supporting one another.

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*Remembering that the universe is so much larger than our ability to comprehend, let us go forth from this time together with the resolve to stop trying to reduce the incomprehensible to our own petty expectations, so that wonder -- that sense of what is sacred -- can find space to open up our minds and illumine our lives.*

**ANNOUNCE NEXT SESSION’S TOPIC: (unless last session)**

**Ask for a volunteer to bring in a CLOSING reading (if needed) for this next session** (It can be something they particularly like, doesn’t necessarily have to relate to the topic.)

**if providing SNACKS, ask for a volunteer**

