

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Covenant Groups Session Plan
“Authority”
Cobbled together by Rev. Maj-Britt Johnson, Chapel Hill, October 2009

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING

Unitarian Universalism has ties to and honors many religious practices, as discussed in the Principles and Purposes document which grounds our belief system. Congregations are self-governing with authority and responsibility vested in the membership of the congregation. **We hallow our time together by kindling the lamp of our heritage.**

CHECK IN – (for the two hour covenant groups)

What you share may be about your physical or spiritual health, cares or concerns for loved ones, issues you are facing.

Each person in the group speaks uninterrupted for approximately ____ minutes. Comfort and care can be offered after the group session.

FOCUS: “Authority”

Mary Pipher, psychologist, Unitarian Universalist, and best selling author has just published a book called, *“Seeking Peace: Chronicles of the Worst Buddhist in the World”* In it she writes: *“Let me be straight with you. I am not writing this book as an **expert** on inner peace. Nor am I offering sage advice from one who has been to the mountaintop. My **authority** does not come from being a relaxed and happy person, but rather from being a person who has **sought** calmness and happiness all of her life. I address you as a woman who has spent plenty of time talking herself and others down from emotional ledges.”* (emphases mine)

In the New Testament it is frequently said of Jesus that “he spoke as one with authority” but it was not the authority of a trained “expert”. When he was compared to the scribes and Pharisees who were the authorities on (his) religion it was to make that point. This turns the traditional idea of religious authority, and where it comes from, on its head. *“Jesus had now finished what he wanted to say, and his teaching made a deep impression on the people because he taught them with authority, and not like their own scribes.”* (Matthew 7:28-29)

Both Pipher and the New Testament writers suggest that spiritual authority is something very different from being an “expert”. Pipher claims an authority based on her authentic encounters with life, and her own being. In my opinion her authority, as she defines it, shines through in her writing and has a healing power.

Jesus’ authority seemed to come from an inner power that was somehow visible to people in his very being, and/or was communicated through his message. It too was a healing power.

Here are some possible questions to share on, choose the one that resonates with you at this moment, in your own life. If none of them do, perhaps something from the quotations did.

Do I like the word authority, or do I resist it? Why? What are my experiences with “authority”? Were they healing or harmful?

Do I have a sense of inner authority? Where does it come from?

If I think of the root of the word authority, “author”, I can ask myself the question: Who is the author of my life? Did I write my own story or was the script written for me?

Guidelines for Sharing – (leader reads these guidelines, or has another person do it, then can repeat the questions again)

We'll each speak for roughly _____ minutes, with no cross talk or interruptions. Cross talk means advice giving, blaming or fixing another person. It is wise to speak in the first person, “I think, I feel...”

When we are listening: Try to listen to each other as if you were listening to, or watching, your own thoughts. Let others' words simply fall down into your heart. It is not necessary to give the person reassurances that they are being heard, such as nodding or eye contact. By simply listening together we create a holding space for each speaker. That is enough.

When it is your turn to speak it is not necessary to respond to the persons who have gone before you, though you may find yourself building on what has been shared already. Find out what your own inner wisdom wants to say. Together we create a quilt of wisdom, the design is a surprise.

(Leader can re-read the questions)

After everyone has shared...

Likes and Wishes – (If there is time, briefly) What did you like about this session? What would you wish to be different if anything?

Extinguishing the chalice and closing words

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.