



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES: Session Plan

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?**
- **Can you say more about that?**
- **How does it make you feel?**
- **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?"**

TOPIC READINGS start on next page:

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

The word contemplation comes from the Greek word, *theoria* - meaning passion and dedication to understanding reality.

Contemplation can include a number of practices that can provide the individual with greater levels of awareness, deep knowing, awakening, emotional balance and peace.

“Go within every day to find the inner strength so that the world will not blow your candle out”. ~ *Katherine Dunham*

“The best cure for a body is a quiet mind”. ~ *Napoleon Bonaparte*

“Inner stillness is the key to outer strength”. ~ *Jared Brock*

“Silence is a fence around wisdom”. ~ *German proverb*



"On the Tree of Contemplative Practices, the roots symbolize the two intentions that are the foundation of all contemplative practices. The roots of the tree encompass and transcend differences in the religious traditions from which many of the practices originated, and allow room for the inclusion of new practices that are being created in secular contexts.

The branches represent different groupings of practices. For example, **Stillness Practices** focus on quieting the mind and body in order to develop calmness and focus. Generative Practices may come in many different forms but share the common intent of generating thoughts and feelings, such as thoughts of devotion and compassion, rather than calming and quieting the mind. (Please note that such classifications are not definitive, and many practices could be included in more than one category.)

Activities not included on the tree (including those which may seem mundane, such as gardening or eating) may be understood to be contemplative practices when done with the intent of cultivating awareness and wisdom."

SOME of the PRACTICES:

Meditation - the practice of turning your attention to a single point of reference. It can involve focusing on the breath, on a sound or on a word or phrase known as a mantra.

"In the midst of movement and chaos keep stillness inside you". ~ *Depak Chopra*

Prayer - the practice of making a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship. A spiritual communion with God.

"Prayer is more than meditation. In meditation, the source of strength is in one's self. When one prays, he goes to a source of strength greater than his own".

~ *Madame Stael*

Contemplation - the practice of looking thoughtfully at something for a long time. Deep reflective thought.

"Give yourself the gift of contemplation in awe of everything you see around you. Go outside and turn your attention to the many miracles you around you.

This 5-minute-a-day regimen of appreciation and gratitude will help you focus your life in awe." ~ *Wayne Dyer*

Mindfulness Meditation - the practice of paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the moment. Thoughts and feelings are not ignored, but acknowledged and observed non-judgmentally as they arise.

"Breathing in I calm my body.
Breathing out I smile.
Dwelling in this present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment"

Visualization- the practice of drawing from your sense of sight to focus your consciousness, creating a visual image in your mind.

"You are more productive by doing 15 minutes of visualization, than 16 hours of hard labor". ~ *Abraham*

Sacred/personal space- using a designated space in your home for contemplation, meditation, prayer or private reflection.

“Your sacred space is where you find yourself over and over again.”

~ *Joseph Campbell*

Retreats- being some place that is a minimal stress environment. It can be a formal guided retreat, a walk in the woods or just being at home without technological disturbance. “The perfect tranquility of life is nowhere to be found but in retreat”.

Labyrinth walking - a walking meditation on an irregular pathway in which there is only one way to go-the way in is the way out. It is often a circle or spiral and can be a metaphor for the journey to our deepest self.

“The point of a maze is to find its center. The point of a labyrinth is to find your center”.

Scientific studies have shown that certain disciplined exercises, kept up over time, have been shown to produce changes that provide the practitioner with greater levels of awareness and deep knowing. These practices can help you access transcendent wisdom and emotional balance.

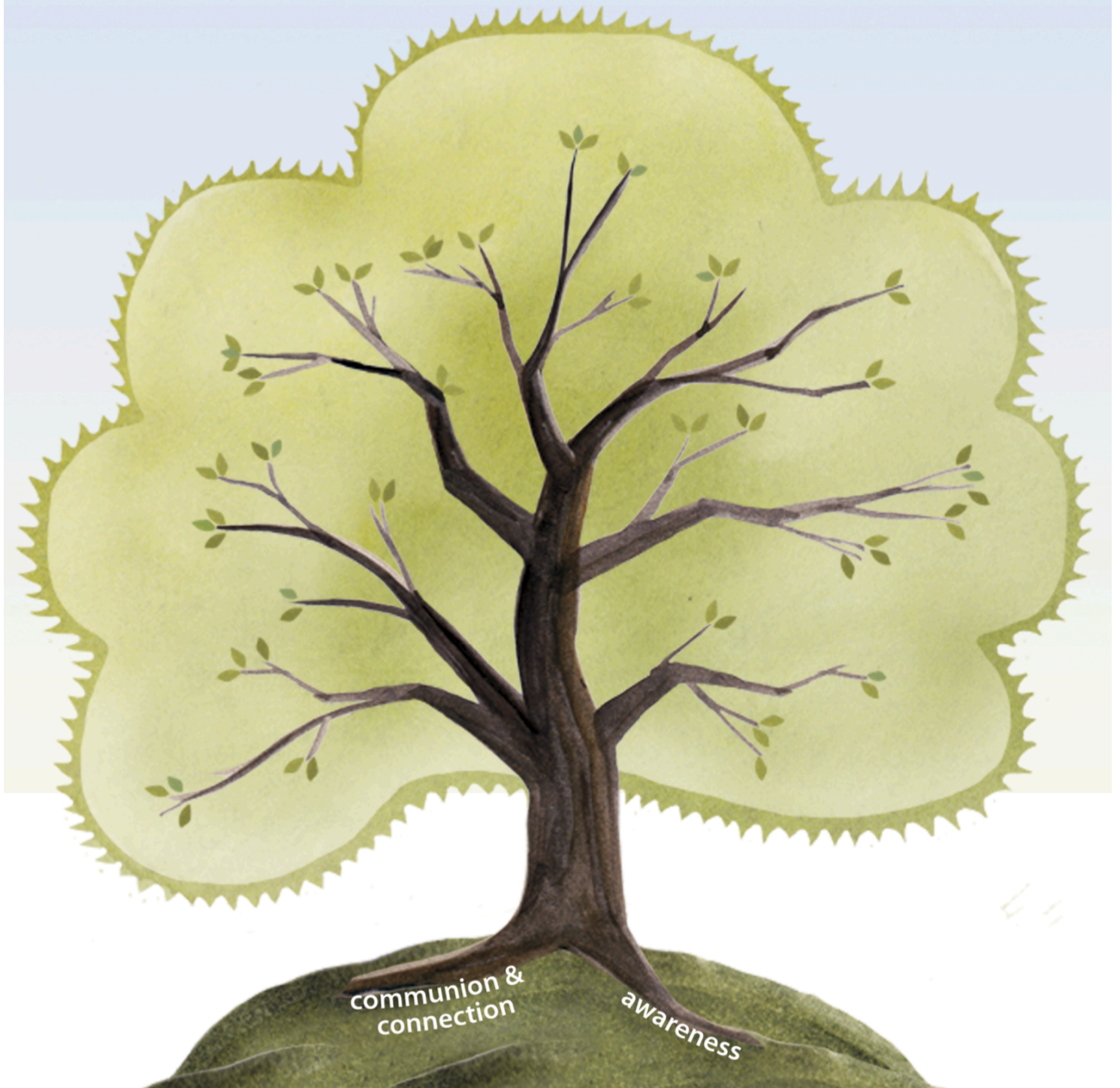
Each individual is drawn to specific contemplative practices that they feel will be a good fit for them.

Activities not included on the tree (including those which may seem mundane, such as gardening or eating) may be understood to be contemplative practices when done with the intent of cultivating awareness and wisdom.”

QUESTIONS:

- What contemplative practices have you used in your life?
 - What have you found to be the most helpful?
 - How have they been helpful to you?
 - Which of the practices discussed today appeals to you?
 - How can you routinely incorporate them into your life?
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- **What else in our experiences might be part of this tree? Fill these in on the blank tree on next page.**

The Tree of Contemplative Practices



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.

OR

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.

OR

May we value our shared reflections and take away new understandings of ourselves, each other, and our being together. Thank you for sharing your story. Thank you for creating a place of safety. Thank you for listening with appreciation.

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