

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Introduction to Couples Oriented Covenant Group Topics

Ken St. John and Janet Nash, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler AZ

The Couples Covenant Group (CCG) is a small group ministry for couples in committed relationships.

Our group consisted of 5 couples, including ourselves, and met twice a month. During our first two years, we came up with 14 session plans intended specifically for couples enrichment.

In some cases we found suitable topics already existed at the UU Small Group Ministry Network's web site, but usually required some tweaks to adapt them for couples. And in several cases we created our own sessions from the ground up.

Our intention is to include any form of committed couples. Please do not be discouraged when some of the sources quoted use terms like "marriage", "husband", or "wife". We believe the inspiration they provide applies to all couples, gay or straight, married or not, in spite for the authors original focus.

Each MSWord file has been prefaced with "couples" to ensure they stay together as a group when alphabetized in the Network Directory and identify them as being specifically oriented to committed couples.

We hope you enjoy using these as much as we did. We plan to continue for a third year and will likely have new sessions to add to the collection as we go.

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Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Couples Covenant Group Session

Being Present Together

Ken St. John, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, June 2011

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

Here and now is the place where all things come together. Here, in this very moment, we find out who and what we are. – *James Ishmael Ford*

CHECK IN: (40 - 50 minutes)

Each person in the group speaks uninterrupted. If time remains, general response and conversation is welcome.

FOCUS:

A man and a woman sit near each other, and they do not long
At this moment to be older, or younger or born
In any other nation, or any other time, or any other place.
They are content to be where they are, talking or not talking.
Their breaths together feed someone whom we do not know.
The man sees the way his fingers move;
He sees her hands close around a book she hands to him.
They obey a third body that they share in common.
They have promised to love that body.
Age may come; parting may come; death will come!
A man and a woman sit near each other;
As they breath they feed someone we do not know,
Someone we know of, whom we have never seen. - *Robert Bly*

Good communication is at the heart of every working marriage. Waiting around for your partner to read your mind won't do the trick. Neither will wishing and hoping that things will somehow change for the better.

- *from Making Marriage Work for Dummies, by Sue and Steven Simring*

DISCUSSION:

- How do you, individually or as a couple, avoid the distractions and become present in the moment?
- Have you ever felt distanced from your partner? How did you resolve it?
- Are you effective communicators; expressive and attentive? How do you use your individual styles and skills to your advantage?

CLOSING WORDS:

Look to this day!
For yesterday is but a dream,
And tomorrow is only a vision;
A dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day. - *Kalidasa*

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Couples Covenant Group Session

Conflict

Ken St. John, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, June 2011

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

“Mature love, the love that grows in a committed relationship, does not come from romantic dinners and champagne. It is forged in fire, through the trials, the boredom, the shared tears and laughter, the decisions and doubts and debts of life together. It takes work and willingness... taking into account that you are not one, no matter how romantic that may sound. You are two, with different thoughts and desires, customs, dislikes and expectations. If instead of giving yourself up to the other, you extend yourself to meet the other, you will have a basis for life together”
- Jackie Clement

CHECK IN: What’s on your mind today?

FOCUS:

“All marriages are happy. It’s trying to live together afterwards that causes all the problems.”
- Shelly Winters

“Communication is at the heart of every working marriage. It’s the only way for you and your partner to let each other know what you need and how you feel. Waiting around for your partner to read your mind won’t do the trick. Neither will wishing and hoping that things will somehow change for the better”

- from *Making Marriage Work for Dummies*, by Sue and Steven Simring

“Couples are well suited when both partners usually feel the need to quarrel at the same time.” -
Jeann Rostand

“Marriage is not just spiritual communion, it is also remembering to take out the trash.” -
Dr. Joyce Brothers

DISCUSSION:

- How do you behave when you’re upset?
- How do you expect your partner to behave when he/she is upset with *you*?
- Do your conflicts draw you closer or drive you apart?
- Does your ratio of bliss to conflict seem about right?

CLOSING WORDS:

“Our love has been anything but perfect and anything but static. There have been times when we have misunderstood each other, demanded too much of each other, been insensitive to the other’s needs. The growth of love is not a straight line, but a series of hills and valleys. Sometimes these desert lines are simply the only way to the next oasis, which is far more lush and beautiful after the desert crossing that it could possibly have been without it.”

- *Madeleine L’Engle*

Expressing Affection

Ken St. John, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, June 2011

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

Life without touch has no art

Life without art has no meaning

Touch me so I can breath

Touch me so I can feel

Touch me so I can cry

Touch me so I can live again

Touch me

- "Goldenrods: Love Poems for the Old & Foolish" by Melinda Morris Perrin (c) 2005
Ice Cube Press. Used with permission.

CHECK IN: (40 - 50 minutes)

FOCUS:

Sex has all sorts of meanings... it's a physical release, a way of sharing love and commitment, and an opportunity to be creative. Sex is also a means of working through our fears and inhibitions – as well as a place where healing and growth take place.

- *from Making Marriage Work for Dummies, by Sue and Steven Simring*

Sharing sex with a partner allows you to discover where the different emotions are stored in each other's bodies, where the hopes and dreams are hidden, where the laughter and pain reside, and what it takes to free the fun, passion and hidden kink. - *from The Guide to Getting It On by Paul Joannides*

Your words are my food, your breath my wine – you are everything to me.

- *Sarah Bernhardt*

DISCUSSION:

- How do you and your partner express your affection for each other?
- How has it evolved with your relationship?
- Tell us all about your sex life ☺
- How might you be an even better lover?

CLOSING WORDS:

The red rose whispers of passion, and the white rose breathes of love;
O the red rose is a falcon, and the white rose is a dove.

But I sent you a cream-white rosebud with a flush on it's petal tips;
For the love that is purest and sweetest has a kiss of desire on the lips

- *John Boyle O'Reilly*

Having Fun

Ken St. John, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, June 2011

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

You're fun to be with, the one to be with
When gray clouds dim the skies
When stocks are falling and brokers calling
You make my spirits rise
When gloom makes up its mind to crawl down from his shelf
You smile and soon I find I'm laughing at myself

- *Irving Berlin*

CHECK IN: (40 - 50 minutes)

Each person in the group speaks uninterrupted. If time remains, general response and conversation is welcome.

FOCUS:

Research by marriage theorist Howard Markman of the University of Denver demonstrates that, aside from making both partners feel good, time spent playing together is an “investment in the relationship that provides a relaxed intimacy that strengthens the bond of marriage.”

- *from Making Marriage Work for Dummies, by Sue and Steven Simring*

Maybe we do the right things
Maybe we do the wrong
Spending each day
Just wending our way along
But when we want to sing, we sing
When we want to dance, we dance
You can do your betting, we're getting
Some fun out of life

- *Billie Holiday*

DISCUSSION:

- How important is it to the health of your relationship to have fun together?
- What have you done for fun together recently?
- Do you still go on dates together?
- How does it compare to what you did for fun when you first met?
- Do you prefer planned or spontaneous fun times?
- What can you, yourself do to make having fun together a priority?

CLOSING WORDS:

You're beautiful, you're glamorous
You're lovable, you're amorous
But most of all you're fun - *Irving Berlin*

Knowing Each Other

Janet Nash, Valley Unitarian Universalist Chandler, AZ, June 2011

Chalice Lighting –

We date, we love together, some of us even get married and have children, but we never struggle to make complex, genuine connections. We interact with our partners through stereotypes and learned behaviors, instead of struggling to be ourselves. The guys do “the guy thing.” The women do “the woman thing.” And we stay on the “safer road.” ~Steven Carter

Brief Check-in –

Introduction to the topic and readings –

Whether it has been six days or years, the patterns remain intact. We greet our partners every night with a kiss and we talk about the weather. We talk about the news. We talk about the neighbors. We talk about our children. We talk about our work. We talk about our pets. We talk about our politics. But we don’t talk about ourselves, and we discourage our partners from talking about themselves. Our moods, our anxieties, our fears, our suspicions, our insecurities, our anger, our happiness, our sadness, our feelings in the moment, our feelings about each other...it never feels like quite the “right time” to bring these up. We may talk – some of us never stop talking – but we don’t talk in a way that leads to deep connection.”

Over time, we become caricatures as people. He becomes “the problem solver,” she becomes “the nurturer”; he becomes “the guy who doesn’t talk about his feelings,” she becomes “the one who’s always perky”; he becomes “the one who works too hard,” she becomes “the one who works even harder.” She cooks, he cleans. She shops for food, he takes out the garbage. She putters, he tinkers. He watches television, she surfs the web. Everybody keeps very busy, safely protected by our roles.

Not surprisingly, the relationship itself can also become a caricature. We become “the couple that always travels” or “the couple that never goes out” or “the couple that never argues” or “the couple that always fights” or “the couple that never has sex” or “the couple that’s always having sex.” Instead of challenging these caricatures, we accept them and support them with our behavior because it seems far easier to play simple roles than to make a genuine connection.

- Do I play roles in my relationship that limit my self-expression? How do these roles make me resentful?
- Do I play roles in my relationship that keep me feeling distant? How might these roles keep my partner at a distance?
- Do I play roles in my relationship that keep me from feeling valued as an individual? Do these roles make me feel invisible or replaceable?

Closing words –

Having a connection, and keeping that connection vital, demands that both partners are endlessly struggling to make themselves be known. Being “known” is the glue that keeps people connected and committed to each other. It is the thing that turns strangers into true and lasting partners. Being known...in every sense; it makes you care. It makes you love. And it allows you to be cared for and loved.

From *Getting to Commitment* by Steven Carter with Julia Sokol

“Learning From Failure”

Adapted by Ken St. John for Couples Covenant Group from: Covenant Group Curriculum, River of Grass Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Davie, FL, June 2011

Opening Words/ Chalice Lighting:

"Whether or not we soften the sense of "sinners" to what Eugene Kennedy calls "mistake makers", the fact remains we are not and never can be perfect. This is not to say we are condemned to making the same mistakes over and over. If we learn from past mistakes, we shall have the joy and sorrow of making some entirely new ones and learning from them as well. That is learning. That is growth. That is what being alive is all about." - *Glenn Turner*

Check-in/Sharing

Topic/Reading:

“Failure is what we're all running from, we're always running toward success with failure at our back. And actually, which one of us has never failed or never been disappointed or betrayed? What I learned to do was to step back and enter the heart of failure. There are a lot of jewels there for awakening.” - *Natalie Goldberg*

Failing is one of the best tutors in career development. Consider the story of a new bank president who went to meet his predecessor. Upon being introduced he quickly said, "I would like to know what have been the keys to your success." The older man looked at him for a moment and replied, "Young man, I can sum it up in two words: Good decisions." To that the young man replied, "I thank you immensely for that advice, sir, but how does one come to know which are the good decisions?" "One word, young man," replied the old man. "Experience." "That's all good and well," said the young executive, "but how does one get experience?" "Two words," replied the old man, "Bad decisions."

If you really want to succeed, be prepared to grow into it. Lose your fear of failure and risk doing something that's important to you. - *Lou Stoops*

Questions for consideration:

Failure: no one intentionally seeks it, but everyone does it.

- What has failure taught you in your life?
- What have you learned from “failed relationships”?
- Do you ever play the blame game?
- In your work, family, religious community, what are the attitudes around failure?
- When you fail at something, what’s the first thing you feel?
- What moves you beyond failure?

Likes and Wishes/Feedback

Closing Words:

“I would rather suffer a hundred failures than count myself among those timid souls who never know great success nor failure because they never tried. - *Teddy Roosevelt*

Magic Moments: Meeting and Mating

Ken St. John, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, June 2011

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

We meet on holy ground,
Brought into being as life encounters life,
As personal histories merge into communal story,
As we take on the pride and pain of our companions,
As separate selves become community. *Richard S. Gilbert*

CHECK IN: (40 - 50 minutes)

Each person in the group speaks uninterrupted, if time remaining, general response and conversation is welcome.

FOCUS:

...it was as if Whoever Is in Charge Here said, "This man needs *that* good woman in his life."
Not "*a* good woman" – of which there has never been a shortage. But "*that* good woman" – of whom there is this only one.

...when I look into her eyes I see the blindness of love. That's the gift. It is not darkness. It is a vision. She sees me in the way Whoever Is in Charge Here meant me to be seen. She sees me better than I see myself. *Thomas Lynch*

Love does not just happen. We are not love machines, puppets on the strings of a deity called "love". Love is a choice – not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile.

Carter Heyward

Love requires us to approach another person, a person different from ourselves, a person in whom we see amazing possibilities, and to trust that person with our happiness and well-being. With that person, a stranger at first, we both lose ourselves and, if all goes well, find ourselves.

Lynn Strauss

DISCUSSION:

- How did you meet? Was it fate? Luck? Or intentional?
- How did you become a couple? Just *fell* in love? Or did it take effort?
- What magic moments have moved your relationship forward?

CLOSING WORDS:

Wine comes in at the mouth
And love comes in at the eye;
That's all we know for truth
Before we grow old and die.
I lift the glass to my mouth,
I look at you, and I sigh.

William Butler Yeats

Marriage

Kaza Sweeney, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, March 2006

Opening Words: “Almost no one is foolish enough to imagine that he automatically deserves great success in any field of activity; yet almost everyone believes that he automatically deserves success in marriage.” ~Sydney J. Harris

Check-in

Focus/Topic: Marriage

Marriage, for better or worse, is embedded in most cultures and society. Its definitions and function vary from country, culture, religion, household and individual. In sickness and in health, it seems everyone holds an opinion on marriage:

“What you are as a single person, you will be as a married person, only to a greater degree. Any negative character trait will be intensified in a marriage relationship, because you will feel free to let your guard down -- that person has committed himself to you and you no longer have to worry about scaring him off.” ~Josh McDowell, *Secrets of Loving*

“A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always with the same person.” ~Mignon McLaughlin, *The Second Neurotic's Notebook*, 1966

“In every marriage more than a week old, there are grounds for divorce. The trick is to find, and continue to find, grounds for marriage.” ~Robert Anderson, *Solitaire & Double Solitaire*

“An object in possession seldom retains the same charm that it had in pursuit.” ~Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus), *Letters*

“I figure that the degree of difficulty in combining two lives ranks somewhere between rerouting a hurricane and finding a parking place in downtown Manhattan.” ~Claire Cloninger, *When the Glass Slipper Doesn't Fit and the Silver Spoon is in Someone Else's Mouth*

“Marriage ceremony: an incredible metaphysical sham of watching God and the law being dragged into the affairs of your family.” ~O.C. Ogilvie

“Sometimes I wonder if men and women really suit each other. Perhaps they should live next door and just visit now and then.” ~Katherine Hepburn

“We support the traditional definition of “marriage” as the legal union of one man and one woman, and we believe that federal judges and bureaucrats should not force states to recognize other living arrangements as marriages. We do not believe sexual preference should be given special legal protection or standing in law.” Source: Republican Platform adopted at GOP National Convention Aug 12, 2000

“It gives me a headache to think about that stuff. I'm just a kid. I don't need that kind of trouble.” ~Kenny, age 7, when asked if it's better to be single or married

Questions

- 1) What is the purpose of marriage? How does it serve us as individuals and as a society?
- 2) What are your expectations of marriage? Are they idealistic or realistic? Have they changed over time?
- 3) What determines the success or failure of a marriage?
- 4) Who plays a role in defining marriage?

Thoughts about the Process & Closing Words: "For two people in a marriage to live together day after day is unquestionably the one miracle the Vatican has overlooked." -Bill Cosby

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Couples Covenant Group Session

Money

Ken St. John, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, June 2011
(Adapted from similar SGM sessions from: Unitarian Universalist Community Church,
Augusta, ME
and Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine, IL)

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

“For Aristotle, economics, management of the household, was a branch of ethics. Did each person in the household receive what is required for a fully human life? . . .Ethical and economic theory must be in dialogue, if just and effective policies are to result. Otherwise, it may be said of us that we may know the price of everything and the value of nothing.”

- *Adapted from Richard S. Gilbert, How Much Do We Deserve? (Introduction), The Flaming Chalice Press, 1990*

CHECK IN: What’s on your mind today?

Activity:

Brainstorm everything that the word “money” brings into association.

DISCUSSION:

“In some way, all financial behavior stems from what we experienced as children. It’s either a reflection of what we learned or a rebellion against it.”

-*Emily Card*

- The meaning of money – What does money mean to you? How is your relationship with money?
- Financial roles – Are you an Earner? Budgeter? Spender? Investor? Planner? Tracker? Manager? Worrier?
- The power of money – Consider the power money has in our lives. How does money’s power affect you and your relationship? Are you okay with that?
- Spirituality and money – How does money interconnect with spirituality for you? What do you think is the role of money in spiritual life?
- How has money’s meaning, power, and place in spiritual life been affected by financial crisis? Have your ideas around those things changed recently?

CLOSING WORDS:

“Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.” *Proverbs 8: 10-11*

HOW DID THIS SESSION GO FOR YOU?

Relationship Challenges

Ken St. John, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, June 2011

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

“Perhaps you’ll tire of me,” muses my love,
although she is like a great city to me, or a park that finds new ways to wear each flounce of
light and investiture of weather.
Soil doesn’t tire of rain, I think.
But I know what she fears:
plans warp, planes explode, topsoil gets peeled away by floods.
And worse than what we can’t control is what we could.

- *from Misgivings by William Matthews*

CHECK IN: What’s on your mind today?

FOCUS:

“The only thing perfect about marriage is the airbrushed wedding photo” - *anon*

“The course of true love never did run smooth” - *William Shakespeare*

“Love is hard work. There is a myth prevalent in our culture that we should be able to fall in
love with someone and then live happily ever after. One of the greatest mistakes that young
lovers make, is believing that a lifelong partnership should be easy, light, and joyful the vast
majority of the time” - *Alan Taylor*

“How do people stay physically fit? Certainly not by fantasizing. A healthy body takes constant
attention and work. The same is true for healthy relationships.”

- *from Making Marriage Work for Dummies, by Sue and Steven Simring*

“Sounds like a lot of work :/” - *Ken St. John*

DISCUSSION:

- What are some of the greatest challenges to maintaining a relationship?
- Does it sometimes seem like a lot of work? Maybe too much?
- How can you make the work feel more like fun?
- When and how should a couple seek help?

CLOSING WORDS:

If you to me be cold, or I be false to you,
The world will go on, I think, just as it used to do;
The clouds will flirt with the moon, the sun will kiss the sea,
The wind to the trees will whisper, and laugh at you and me;
But the sun will not shine so bright,
the clouds will not seem so white, to one, as they will to two
So I think you had better be kind, and I had best be true
And let the old love go on, just as it used to do - *Will Carleton*

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Committed Couples Covenant Group Session

SEPARATENESS & TOGETHERNESS

J. Nash & K. St. John, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ

Adapted from Glenn Turner, First UU Church, Auburn, ME. June 2011

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

I asked the professors who teach the meaning of life to tell me what happiness is. I went to famous executives who boss the work of thousands of men. They all shook their heads and gave me a smile as though I was trying to fool with them. Then one Sunday afternoon I wandered out along the Desplaines River and I saw a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with their women and children and a keg of beer and an accordion. - "Happiness" by Carl Sandburg

CHECK IN: (40 - 50 minutes)

Each person in the group speaks uninterrupted, if time remaining, general response and conversation is welcome. Remember confidentiality.

FOCUS:

As couples, how do we maintain our separate identities while benefiting from intimate togetherness? We need both time together and time alone. Some of us are introverts and need time alone to reflect, think things through, and recharge our spirits. Some of us are extraverts and prefer more interaction. It may be our alone time that energizes us, or being together and interacting that recharges us. To a greater or lesser degree, we need both.

DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS:

- When do you seek out time to be alone?
- What do you do with your alone time?
- How does it affect your life when you do not have enough time alone?
- What kind of time or interaction do you need with your partner for you to be happy, useful, fulfilled, and growing in your relationship?
- Does your sociability crave sports, parties, conversations?
- Do you have social activities you do together and others separately?
- What kind of interaction brings playfulness, soul-searching, or joy to your relationship?
- What rejuvenates you in inside and outside your partnership?

CLOSING WORDS:

When we are silent together, it is like being alone. We withdraw into ourselves and cherish the silence. And when the silence ends, for a few moments we are alone together. Then when we speak, speech comes from a deeper source.

"Let there be spaces in our togetherness. Let the winds of the heavens dance between you." – Khalil Gibran

The Roles We Play

Ken St. John, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, June 2011

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING:

“Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.”

- *Sigmund Freud*

CHECK IN: (40 - 50 minutes)

Each person in the group speaks uninterrupted.

FOCUS:



From The Donna Reed Show

“One of the great joys of marriage is the ability to pool your strengths and special gifts.... Strong marriages are collaborative efforts in which both partners are dedicated to improving – as individuals *and* as a couple. Each partner brings a unique package of strengths and weaknesses to the table, and each has a separate timetable for growth.”

- *from Making Marriage Work for Dummies, by Sue and Steven Simring*

DISCUSSION:

- What distinct roles do you each play in your relationship?
- In what ways are they traditional or nontraditional roles?
- Are the roles established by choice or necessity?
- Does the distribution of responsibility seem fair and equitable?
- How do you maintain a comfortable balance of power?

CLOSING WORDS:

“Spouses who capitalize on their differences have the potential to become highly effective in their joint efforts. But, you need to recognize your different skills and strengths and use them in ways that enhance the marriage rather than tear it apart.

- *from Making Marriage Work for Dummies, by Sue and Steven Simring*

“Time to Commit”

Exploring UU World Article, "Time to Commit" by William J. Doherty
Jerry Dingus, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, June 2011

Opening Words:

Make Not a Bond of Love by Kahill Gibran

Reading 730 from Singing the Living Tradition (Silver Hymnal)

Check-in/Sharing

Approximately two minutes for each person to share how they are feeling in the moment and what thoughts and feelings occupied their mind from the day.

Topic Questions to Ponder:

This session is exploring the topic of marriage as discussed in the 2005 UU World article “Time to Commit” by William J. Doherty.

- What is the purpose of marriage?
- What was it originally, what is it now?
- The subtitle of the article is: Unitarian Universalist support for marriage needs to extend beyond the right to marry and the right to divorce. Do you agree or disagree?
- How is marriage different than other loving long term relationships?
- What could a congregation offer to others in terms of marriage support?
- What are your thoughts on marriage and the consumer mentality?

Check out

What did you enjoy about this session? What would you wish for future sessions?

Closing:

Love is patient and is kind; love doesn't envy. Love doesn't brag, is not proud, doesn't behave itself inappropriately, doesn't seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

1 Corinthians 13: 4-8

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Couples Covenant Group Session

TRUST

Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ

Chalice Lighting –

We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith: to seek truth and honesty, to build respect, and to foster healthy relationships between all people, beginning with ourselves. May we dedicate our time together to these purposes.

Brief Check-in –

Introduction to the topic and readings –

Envision yourself fully trusting your partner and being trusted. It is a gift you are giving each other. What does it feel like? What does it look like?

In an intimate partnership, the creation of "we," or a sense of mutuality, is extremely important. One of the best ways to achieve that state is by communicating openly.

Communicating openly includes stating your thoughts and feelings genuinely and respectfully. It means sharing and listening in ways that balance honesty with respect for your partner's feelings. Open communication is not just about the openness of the speaker — it's also about the openness of the listener. When a listener's feelings are hurt, that openness can become closed.

Effective communicators are good at observing, listening, and interpreting nonverbal information. They also understand how and when to offer a clear response or opinion, and both partners know when it is appropriate to express their own feelings.

The level of trust between partners can influence their relationship, even though they may not be aware of it. It can affect their compatibility and ability to collaborate.

Trust levels may be affected by many things: past relationships, experiences with the current partner, issues from childhood, and observations of other couples' interactions.

Questions –

Can you name some fears that get in the way of trust? One example is "fear of being vulnerable." What are some other examples?

What are some things you and your partner do that continue to enhance the trust between you?

I trust this relationship because . . .

I sometimes withhold trust, or fear going deeper, because . . .

Closing words –

Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow, if they succeed in loving the distance between them, which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against a wide sky!

— Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Letters to a Young Poet*

From Principled Commitment Program

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