

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, OR  
**Death and Dying Small Group Ministry (Six Session Series)**

Session 1. Talking About Death.

CHALICE OR CANDLE LIGHTING OR SOUND A CHIME (2 to 3 minutes for this and silence and opening words)

MOMENT OF SILENCE

OPENING WORDS

We come seeking to nurture our personal and spiritual growth and exploration and the opportunity to build community with deeper connections and friendships. As we gather here may we create a haven for careful listening, for respectful honest sharing to the extent that we choose, and for increased understanding of others and ourselves.

CHECK-IN (up to 20 to 30 minutes total with up to 2 to 3 minutes per person, without interruption: name, what pronoun [she, he, they, other] you would liked used when referring to you, how long associated with UUCE and Unitarian Universalism, prior Small Group Ministry (SGM) experience, and how you feel now)

WELCOME AND REVIEW OF THE SGM PROGRAM (25 minutes)

Review the structure and format of the SGM group (as described in the Death and Dying Small Group Ministry pamphlet). Give a copy of the pamphlet to each person.

Hand out and review the SGM Covenant of Right Relationship, which has on the back: “Why a Covenant?”; the “UUCE Mission Statement”; the “UUCE Covenant of Right Relations”; and the “Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association.” Consider having each person read a line of the SGM covenant and then ask for questions and comments at the end of each section. In particular, it is important to discuss confidentiality and what that means to people and to get agreement about this.

The quotes used in the session plans are selected to provide a diversity of viewpoints to stimulate reflection and sharing. We attempt to have a balance of quotes from female and male authors and various cultural perspectives, but the balance may not be exactly equal in each session or overall. The quotes do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of UUCE, and selection of a quote does not imply that it necessarily is considered to be truth. Also, some quotes may contain gender or other references that were used by the author of the quote, and may not be considered to be inclusive or politically correct by contemporary standards.

BREAK (10 minutes)

TOPIC AND SHARING (45 to 50 minutes including the readings, the questions, the sharing, and optional open discussion at the end if the group agrees)

OVERVIEW OF THIS PROGRAM AND THE SESSIONS

This program uses the Small Group Ministry model to facilitate a process of personal reflection, learning, and spiritual growth focused on the topic of death and dying. The sessions will include sociological information and reflection, theological reflection, personal and shared narrative, creative expression, and journaling. The program is not designed as a grief support group. We have the goal of finding a closer and more comfortable relationship with our own inevitable death.

Session 1. Talking About Death.

Session 2. Finding Our Personal Views on Death.

Session 3. Beliefs and Practices: What Happens When We Die?

Session 4. Bereavement.

Session 5. Suicide and the Right to Die.

Session 6. Sharing New Insights.

**QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS** (Give a piece of paper and writing implement to each person and allow a few minutes for people to make notes, if they wish, before sharing.)

1. Please share what would you like the group to know to about you, including if you wish, where you are on your life journey, and what aspects of your life are particularly important at this time.
2. What drew you to participate in this program, and what do you hope to experience?

**SHARING** (up to 3 to 6 minutes each without interruption, depending on the time available, with the option of time at the end for open discussion after all have shared)

**OTHER WORDS USED TO REFER TO DEATH, BURIAL, FUNERAL, GRIEF.**

Identify as many words as you can, including slang terms and metaphors and euphemisms. Are there different emotional associations with different words? (Someone will write the words for all to see.)

**ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS** (up to 5 minutes).

- Confirm future meeting dates, time, place, and topic.
- Fill out the sign up sheet for who will bring snacks to future sessions.
- Ask people if they: can receive materials electronically; can open attachments, and if so what kind (.doc, pdf, other); have a printer.
- Invite people to bring their own journaling materials to future sessions if they wish.

**LIKES** (celebrations, gratitudes, appreciations for needs met) and **WISHES** (mournings, requests, acknowledgements of needs not met)/**CHECK-OUT** (a few words or phrases from each person who wants to share, up to 5 minutes total)

**CLOSING WORDS** (2 minutes for words, and closing)

We give thanks for the gifts of each other's sharing. We say, "Thank you for risking your story. Thank you for creating a place of safety. Thank you for listening with appreciation as we deepen our knowing of one another through the weeks to come."

-Adapted from Tony Bushman, MDiv, and Rev. Bill Hamilton-Holway, Unitarian Universalist minister, in *Gatherings*.

**EXTINGUISH THE CHALICE OR CANDLE OR SOUND A CHIME** (and additional optional closing ritual if agreed to)

(Preparation for the facilitators. Please bring the SGM Facilitator Training Manual; a folder for each person with a copy of the session plan, the Death and Dying Small Group Ministry pamphlet, SGM Covenant of Right Relationship, blank paper; writing implements; candle or chime; a timekeeping device; name tags; snacks; and your calendar/date book. Have available an easel with blank paper and markers, and/or a white board with dry erase markers.)

Session plan prepared by: Kimberly Wootan, Intern Minister; and Dick Loescher, chair of Small Group Ministry steering committee. March 10, 2016.

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Session 2. Finding Our Personal Views on Death.

CHALICE OR CANDLE LIGHTING OR SOUND A CHIME (2 to 3 minutes for this and silence and opening words)

MOMENT OF SILENCE

OPENING WORDS

Let our sharing together provide a place where memories are rooted, where mysteries are pondered, where dreams are nourished, where love is freely given, where failures are owned and accepted, where sorrows are transformed, where our lives are deepened, challenged, and uplifted. Let this be such a time and place.

-Adapted from Rev. David E. Bumbaugh, Unitarian Universalist Minister

CHECK-IN (up to 20 to 30 minutes total with up to 2 to 3 minutes per person)

TOPIC AND SHARING (up to 77 minutes for readings, questions and requests, a few minutes for reflection and making notes if desired, individual sharing, optional open discussion at the end if the group agrees, and a 10 minute break)

READINGS

When death or dying comes calling at the door, like a bracing wind it clears our being of pettiness. It connects us to others. More alert to life's fragility, we reawaken to life's preciousness. To be fully human is to care, and attending to death prompts the most eloquent form of caring imaginable.

-Rev. Forrest Church, Unitarian Universalist minister

It's only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth—that we have no way of knowing when our time is up—that we will begin to love each day to the fullest, as if it was the only one we had.”

-Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, MD, Swiss-American psychiatrist, author, and pioneer in studies of death and dying

We know that all is impermanent; we know that everything wears out. Although we can buy this truth intellectually, emotionally we have a deep-rooted aversion to it. We want permanence; we expect permanence. Our natural tendency is to seek security where we believe we can find it. We experience impermanence at the everyday level as frustration. We use our daily activity as a shield against the fundamental ambiguity of our situation, expending tremendous energy trying to ward off impermanence and death. We don't like that our bodies change shape. We don't like it that we age. We are afraid of wrinkles and sagging skin. We use health products as if we actually believe that our skin, our hair, our eyes and teeth, might somehow miraculously escape the truth of impermanence.

-Pema Chödrön, American Tibetan Buddhist nun, author

A garden is always a series of losses set against a few triumphs, like life itself.

-May Sarton, American poet, novelist, and memoirist

BREAK (10 minutes)

QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS (Please respond to any of the questions, requests, and readings you feel moved by. It is not necessary to respond to all of them.)

1. Share your first experience with death and what that was like for you.
2. Tell about a time of facing your own death and how that has influenced your life.
3. What experiences have contributed to your personal views on death and dying?

SHARING (up to 6 to 8 minutes each without interruption, depending on the time available, with optional open discussion at the end after all have shared)

## JOURNALING

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS (up to 3 minutes). Alternatively, this agenda item can be done after the check-in, if the group decides to do that.

-Confirm next meeting date, time, location, and topic.

-Other

LIKES (celebrations, gratitudes, appreciations for needs met) and WISHES (mournings, requests, acknowledgements of needs not met)/CHECK-OUT (a few words or phrases from each person who wants to share, up to 5 minutes total)

CLOSING WORDS (2 minutes for words, and closing)

We are grateful for this community, for the opportunity to listen and to learn, and for the making and deepening of friendships. May we support one another on our journeys.

EXTINGUISH THE CHALICE OR CANDLE OR SOUND A CHIME (and additional optional closing ritual if agreed to)

(Preparation for the facilitator. Please bring: the SGM Facilitator Training Manual binder; the session plan for each person; any handouts for each person; blank paper; writing implements; art materials; a candle or chime; a timekeeping device; name tags; snacks; and your calendar/date book. Have available an easel with blank paper and markers, and/or a white board and dry erase markers.)

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Session 3. Beliefs and Practices: What Happens When We Die?

CHALICE OR CANDLE LIGHTING OR SOUND A CHIME (2 to 3 minutes for this and silence and opening words)

MOMENT OF SILENCE

OPENING WORDS

Numerous are our origins, our paths, and our destinations. And yet, happily, our ways have joined together here today. May our joining be a blessing. May it bring comfort to those who are in pain. May it bring hope to those who despair. May it bring peace to those who tremble in fear. May it bring wisdom and guidance for our journeys. And though this joining may be for just a moment in time, the moment is all we can ever be certain of. May we embrace this, and every instant of our lives. -Adapted from Rev. Andrew Pakula, Unitarian minister

CHECK-IN (up to 20 to 30 minutes total with up to 2 to 3 minutes per person)

TOPIC AND SHARING (up to 77 minutes for readings, questions and requests, a few minutes for reflection and making notes if desired, individual sharing, optional open discussion at the end if the group agrees, and a 10 minute break)

READINGS

Unitarian Universalist views about life after death are informed by both science and spiritual traditions. Many of us live with the assumption that life does not continue after death, and many of us hold it as an open question, wondering if our minds will have any awareness when we are no longer living. Few of us believe in divine judgment after death. It's in our religious DNA: the Universalist side of our tradition broke with mainstream Christianity by rejecting the idea of eternal damnation.

-From the Unitarian Universalist Association website

The state of death is one of two things: either the dead man wholly ceases to be, and loses all sensation; or according to the common belief, it is a change and a migration of the soul to another place... But now the time has come, and we must go hence; I to die, and you to live. Whether life or death is better is known to God, and to God only.

-Plato, Greek philosopher

I died a mineral, and became a plant.

I died a plant, and rose an animal.

I died an animal, and I was man.

Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?

-Rumi, 13<sup>th</sup> Century Persian poet, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic

Death is like an unmapped land – a place our minds can't fully comprehend, but on the perimeters of which we are summoned to both new spiritual depths and sheer terror. Maybe our only call, both for ourselves and for our culture in denial, is to acknowledge this strange tension and learn to live with it.

As others have noted, intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at one time.

Perhaps an honest life means having the ability to do the same with death.

-Laine Bergeson, assistant editor Utne Magazine, from *Good Life, Good Death*

Our beliefs are varied, but we are united by our mortality. We may not know death, but we know loss. We may not see what's next, but we seek assurance. Let love both ease our death, and soothe our soul.  
-Kate Walker, Unitarian Universalist minister

BREAK (10 minutes)

QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS (Please respond to any of the questions, requests, and readings you feel moved by. It is not necessary to respond to all of them.)

1. Share your thoughts, hopes, and fears about death.
2. How do your cultural and religious beliefs or world view, and whether or not you have a concept of an "afterlife", influence your view of death?
3. How do reports of near death experiences influence your views?

SHARING (up to 6 to 8 minutes each without interruption, depending on the time available, with optional open discussion at the end after all have shared)

JOURNALING

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS (up to 3 minutes). Alternatively, this agenda item can be done after the check-in, if the group decides to do that.

- Confirm next meeting date, time, location, and topic.
- Other

LIKES (celebrations, gratitudes, appreciations for needs met) and WISHES (mournings, requests, acknowledgements of needs not met)/CHECK-OUT (a few words or phrases from each person who wants to share, up to 5 minutes total)

CLOSING WORDS (2 minutes for words, and closing)

As we take our leave, let us pick up what we may have learned here today and hold it fast in our arms. Let us also hold gently in our hearts that which is larger than any one of our selves, the vitality of this group. Let us covenant with each other to return again as fresh selves, as new beings, to this space of pain and sorrow and of comfort and joy. Let us then refresh and nourish each other, and return to what we still must learn about our self and each other. Go in peace.

-Author unknown

EXTINGUISH THE CHALICE OR CANDLE OR SOUND A CHIME (and additional optional closing ritual if agreed to)

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Session 4. Bereavement.

CHALICE OR CANDLE LIGHTING OR SOUND A CHIME (2 to 3 minutes for this and silence and opening words)

MOMENT OF SILENCE

OPENING WORDS

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted...when we are in trouble and afraid...when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again. We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone...in the hour of our successes, when we look for someone to share our triumphs...in the hour of our defeat when with encouragement we might endure and stand again. We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey. All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

-Adapted from George Odell, Reading #468, Unitarian Universalist Association Hymnal *Singing the Living Tradition*

CHECK-IN (up to 20 to 30 minutes total with up to 2 to 3 minutes per person)

TOPIC AND SHARING (up to 77 minutes for readings, questions and requests, a few minutes for reflection and making notes if desired, individual sharing, optional open discussion at the end if the group agrees, and a 10 minute break)

READINGS

There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love.

-Washington Irving, American author

We all want to do something to mitigate the pain of loss or to turn grief into something positive, to find a silver lining in the clouds. But I believe there is real value in just standing there, being still, being sad.

-John Green, author

To spare oneself from grief at all cost can be achieved only at the price of total detachment, which excludes the ability to experience happiness.

-Erich Fromm, German social psychologist, humanistic philosopher

We open our hearts to love, yet sometimes find pain. We open our hearts to connection, yet sometimes find loss. We yearn for simplicity, yet sometimes find complexity. Our hearts heal, find connection and we embrace life in all its simplicity and its complexity, with love, with trust and compassion.

-Rev. Kate Walker, Unitarian Universalist minister

DABDA. Acronym for the stages of grieving a loss described by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. These are some of the many emotions people may feel, and which may occur in any order and last any duration, and which may recur.

-Adapted from Wikipedia

Grief can awaken us to new values and new and deeper appreciations. Grief can cause us to reprioritize things in our lives, to recognize what's really important and put it first. Grief can heighten our gratitude as we cease taking the gifts life bestows on us for granted. Grief can give us the wisdom of being with death. Grief can make death the companion on our left who guides us and gives us advice. None of this growth makes the loss good and worthwhile, but it is the good that comes out of the bad.

-Roger Bertschusen, Unitarian Universalist minister

BREAK (10 minutes)

QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS (Please respond to any of the questions, requests, and readings you feel moved by. It is not necessary to respond to all of them.)

1. Share your experience with loss and grief, and who and what practices were helpful for you?
2. What role did your religious or world view beliefs and communities that you were connected with have in those experiences (e.g. attending a funeral, a wake ceremony, sitting shiva, etc.).
3. Share a time of being of help and support to someone who was grieving.

SHARING (up to 6 to 8 minutes each without interruption, depending on the time available, with optional open discussion at the end after all have shared)

HANDOUTS ABOUT GRIEF AND GRIEF RESOURCES

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS (up to 3 minutes). Alternatively, this agenda item can be done after the check-in, if the group decides to do that.

-Confirm next meeting date, time, location, and topic.

-Other

LIKES (celebrations, gratitudes, appreciations for needs met) and WISHES (mournings, requests, acknowledgements of needs not met)/CHECK-OUT (a few words or phrases from each person who wants to share, up to 5 minutes total)

CLOSING WORDS (2 minutes for words, and closing)

As we leave this circle of sharing, connections, and learning, may our hearts be filled, comforted, and strengthened as we move forward into the coming days.

EXTINGUISH THE CHALICE OR CANDLE OR SOUND A CHIME (and additional optional closing ritual if agreed to)

(Preparation for the facilitator. Please bring: the SGM Facilitator Training Manual binder; the session plan for each person; any handouts for each person; blank paper; writing implements; art materials; a candle or chime; a timekeeping device; name tags; snacks; and your calendar/date book. Have available an easel with blank paper and markers, and/or a white board and dry erase markers.)

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Session 5. Suicide and the Right To Die.

CHALICE OR CANDLE LIGHTING OR SOUND A CHIME (2 to 3 minutes for this and silence and opening words)

MOMENT OF SILENCE

OPENING WORDS

We have gathered here in search of answers to hard questions. We have come in search of understanding, in search of community. We have come in search of hope and healing. Let this be a place not only of searching, but also of discovery. Let this be a place not only of learning, but also of wisdom. Let this be a place not only of meeting, but also of connection. And let this be a place where healing fosters giving, and hope fosters service.

-Adapted from Rev. Sue Ayer, Unitarian Universalist minister

CHECK-IN (up to 20 to 30 minutes total with up to 2 to 3 minutes per person)

TOPIC AND SHARING (up to 77 minutes for readings, questions and requests, a few minutes for reflection and making notes if desired, individual sharing, optional open discussion at the end if the group agrees, and a 10 minute break)

READINGS

People with serious illness have priorities besides simply prolonging their lives. Surveys find that their top concerns include avoiding suffering, strengthening relationships with family and friends, being mentally aware, not being a burden on others, and achieving a sense that their life is complete...

Inevitably the question arises ...whether the logic of sustaining people's autonomy and control requires helping them to accelerate their own demise when they wish to. "Assisted suicide" has become the term of art, though advocates prefer the euphemism "death with dignity." We clearly already recognize some form of this right when we allow people to refuse food or water or medications and treatments, even when the momentum of medicine fights against it. We accelerate a person's demise every time we remove someone from an artificial respirator or artificial feeding....We also recognize the necessity of allowing doses of narcotics and sedatives that reduce pain and discomfort even if they may knowingly speed death. All proponents seek is the ability for suffering people to obtain a prescription for the same kind of medications, only this time to let them hasten the timing of their death. We are running up against the difficulty of maintaining a coherent philosophical distinction between giving people the right to stop external or artificial processes that prolong their lives and giving them the right to stop the natural, internal processes that do so.

At root, the debate is about what mistakes we fear most – the mistake of prolonging suffering or the mistake of shortening valued life. We stop the healthy from committing suicide because we recognize that their psychic suffering is often temporary....and indeed only a minority of people saved from suicide make a repeated attempt; the vast majority eventually report being glad to be alive. But for the terminally ill who face suffering that we know will increase, only the stonehearted can be unsympathetic.

At the same time, I fear what happens when we expand the terrain of medical practice to include actively assisting people with speeding their death. I am less worried about abuse of these powers than

I am about dependence on them....Our ultimate goal, after all, is not a good death but a good life to the very end....Certainly, suffering at the end of life is sometimes unavoidable and unbearable, and helping people end their misery may be necessary....But we damage entire societies if we let providing this capability divert us from improving the lives of the ill. Assisted living is far harder than assisted death, but its possibilities are far greater, as well.

-Atul Gawande, MD, from *Being Mortal*

BREAK (10 minutes)

QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS (Please respond to any of the questions, requests, and readings you feel moved by. It is not necessary to respond to all of them.)

1. How has your life been touched by suicide?

2. Share your views on the Unitarian Universalist 1988 General Resolution “The Right to Die with Dignity”, with option for people to choose to have life sustaining measures withheld if they are terminally ill (“living will”), and the right choose the time of their death with measures to end their life.

SHARING (up to 5 to 8 minutes each without interruption, depending on the time available, with optional open discussion at the end after all have shared)

HANDOUTS ABOUT SUICIDE AND THE RIGHT TO DIE

JOURNALING

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS (up to 5-10 minutes). Alternatively, this agenda item can be done after the check-in, if the group decides to do that.

-Confirm next meeting date, time, location, and topic.

-Other

LIKES (celebrations, gratitudes, appreciations for needs met) and WISHES (mournings, requests, acknowledgements of needs not met)/CHECK-OUT (a few words or phrases from each person who wants to share, up to 5 minutes total)

CLOSING WORDS (2 minutes for words, and closing)

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.

-Adapted from Tony Bushman, MDiv, and Rev. Bill Hamilton-Holway, in *Gatherings*

EXTINGUISH THE CHALICE OR CANDLE OR SOUND A CHIME (and additional optional closing ritual if agreed to)

(Preparation for the facilitator. Please bring: the SGM Facilitator Training Manual binder; paper and writing implements; the session plan; any handouts; a candle or chime; a timekeeping device; and your calendar/date book.)

Session plan prepared by Kimberly Wootan, Intern Minister, and Dick Loescher, chair of Small Group Ministry steering committee.

May 12, 2016.

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Session 6. Sharing New Insights.

CHALICE OR CANDLE LIGHTING OR SOUND A CHIME (2 to 3 minutes for this and silence and opening words)

MOMENT OF SILENCE

OPENING WORDS

We come together in an attitude of openness - not knowing quite what will happen, yet daring to receive a new idea, a new experience, sustenance for our minds and our hearts. ... We come ... seeking human warmth and connection in the hands and faces of those around us ... seeking reconfirmation and renewal of life, of love, and of hope.

-Adapted from Peter Lee Scott, Unitarian Universalist minister

CHECK-IN (up to 20 to 30 minutes total with up to 2 to 3 minutes per person)

COMPLETION OF THE EVALUATION FORM (up to 15 minutes)

The evaluation forms may have been given or sent by paper mail or e-mail to group members ahead of time, or may be distributed at this session. Give the completed paper evaluation forms to the co-facilitators.

TOPIC AND SHARING (up to 60 minutes for readings, questions and requests, a few minutes for reflection and making notes if desired, individual sharing, optional open discussion at the end if the group agrees, and a 10 minute break)

READINGS

And so I shall go, in time, as all Go and greet this sustaining earth with gratitude and pray I am worthy and have served Her well.

-Melitta Haslund, from *A Shovel Full of Earth*

Saying goodbye, to some people, feels like the end of the world for them; but to others, it feels good.

-Author unknown

Don't cry because it is over. Smile because it happened.

-Theodor Seuss Geisel, American Writer, "Dr. Seuss"

Some people come quickly into our lives and quickly go. Some stay for a while, leave footprints on our hearts, and we are never, ever the same.

-Flavia Weedn, artist and writer

Go your way, not knowing the answers to all things, yet seeking always the answer to one more thing than you know.

-Rev. John W. Brigham, Unitarian Universalist minister

With courage we turn to look, with fear and love pulling us forward, death will greet us one day. We look, but we do not welcome, not this time, not next time, we only look, with courage.

-Rev. Kate Walker, Unitarian Universalist minister

BREAK (10 minutes)

QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS (Please respond to any of the questions, requests, and readings you feel moved by. It is not necessary to respond to all of them.)

1. How would you like to be remembered? What legacy do you want to leave?
2. Share unexpected lessons and gifts that have come with losses in your life.
3. What new insights have you gained from being part of this program that will be of value to you and others?

SHARING (up to 6 to 8 minutes each without interruption, depending on the time available, with optional open discussion at the end after all have shared)

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS (up to 2 minutes). Alternatively, this agenda item can be done after the check-in, if the group decides to do that.

LIKES (celebrations, gratitudes, appreciations for needs met) and WISHES (mournings, requests, acknowledgements of needs not met)/CHECK-OUT (a few words or phrases from each person who wants to share, up to 10 minutes total)

CLOSING WORDS (2 minutes for words, and closing)

Our time in this place may have ended, but our connection to each other and this community remains. Together may we walk the path of justice, speak words of love, live the selfless deed, tread gently upon the earth, and fill the world with compassion.

-Rev. Kathy A. Huff, Unitarian Universalist Minister

EXTINGUISH THE CHALICE OR CANDLE OR SOUND A CHIME (and additional optional closing ritual if agreed to)

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May 6, 2016.