

Covenant Groups for November, 2009

Theme: "Empathy"

Rev. Maj-Britt Johnson and Linda Thompson, Chapel Hill, NC

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING

"Empathy is full presence to what's alive in the other person at this moment"

John Cunningham

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.

Reading

"You know, there's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit--the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us---the child who's hungry, the steelworker who's been laid-off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town. When you think like this--when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers--it becomes harder not to act; harder not to help".

Barack Obama

FOCUS: "Empathy"

We could spend a lot of time trying to define the word empathy and how it is different from or similar to sympathy and compassion, instead, for today, let's work with this definition:

Empathy, which literally translates as 'in feeling', is the capability to share and understand another's emotions and feelings. It is often characterized as the ability to "put oneself into another's shoes".

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.

Where does empathy come from? Do animals show empathy?

Is deep listening a form of empathy? By our attention to a person's story and experience, rather than offering to rewrite or fix, are we showing empathy?

Do you believe empathy is an essential human quality?

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 – What did you like about this session? What would you wish to be different if anything?

Extinguishing the chalice and closing words

"Suffering and joy teach us, if we allow them, how to make the leap of empathy, which transports us into the soul and heart of another person. In those transparent moments we know other people's joys and sorrows, and we care about their concerns as if they were our own."

Fritz Williams

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.