

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
“The Empty Chair: Openness and Intimacy in Small Group”
Covenant Group Session for June 2012
Rev. Maj-Britt Johnson, Community Church of Chapel Hill, NC, June 2012

Opening reading for chalice lighting:

"...the most subversive invitation you could ever accept is the invitation to awaken to who you are and where you have landed. Plato said in “The Symposium” that one of the greatest privileges of a human life is to become midwife to the birth of the soul in another. When your soul awakens, you begin to truly inherit your life. You leave the kingdom of fake surfaces, repetitive talk and weary roles and slip deeper into the true adventure of who you are and who you are called to become. The greatest friend of the soul is the unknown. Yet we are afraid of the unknown because it lies outside our vision and our control. We avoid it or quell it by filtering it through our protective barriers of domestication and control. The normal way never leads home.

(John O'Donahue)

Brief silent meditation

Check in:

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

Opening words:

In every small group there will be a tension felt between openness and intimacy. Typically Covenant Groups in UU (when they remember to do this) will have an empty chair in the circle to symbolize a number of things: That the group is open to new people and the changes they bring. That the group welcomes the power of transformation. That the group is open to the creative spirit.

At the end of the year we recombine members of our groups so that we can reinforce the idea that our groups are not private clubs, and so that new members can learn from “old” members. Over time, if you stick with it, you will also get to know more people in the church on a deeper level than you would if you stayed with one group “forever”. This builds a stronger web of community in the church, overall, than if people choose safety and security and only stay with their own small circle of friends.

However real intimacy does takes time to build, over time, and the group may be just starting to really cohere at the point when it breaks up. It’s natural to want to keep on going if intimacy has been found. Intimacy might be defined as deep, lasting relationships where spiritual transformation takes place. In a way covenant groups are also a place where you are, as Plato wrote, midwives to the birth of each other’s souls. I hope that you will find ways to continue to connect with the members of your group, and/or to bring the wisdom or hope you’ve found in your group, into all of your church relationships. In that way you are each a part of the ministry of the church.

Small groups are one of the ways we can search for, and name, what is most authentic, powerful and light-filled within ourselves, and our faith community. We do that *by* creating safe intimate space but *for* the purpose of carrying that warm light out into the world. May you journey in peace this summer - Maj-Britt

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

After we hear the story and the questions, we'll each speak for about _____ minutes, with no cross talk. In other words, no advice-giving, blaming, setting someone straight, saving, fixing. To avoid cross-talk it is wise to speak in the first person. Give yourself permission to keep the focus on yourself for this brief time.

When you are listening: 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 even eye contact. By simply deeply listening, together, we create a compassionate, holding space for each speaker. Comfort and care can be offered after the group session, but during the session may actually interfere with an individual's own discernment.

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.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the hope within you that you want most to share with the world?
2. How do you balance intimacy and openness in the various groups and situations you find yourself in, in your life?

Closing Ritual

Tonight is the last session for this church year. Take time to celebrate each other: The bonds you've formed, the closeness you've shared, the questions, the wisdom you've shared. Appreciate each other by sharing in a flower communion.

As you take a flower you might name what you will be taking with you from this particular group.

And/or the leader might suggest that as each person chooses a flower the rest of the group then says a few words about what they most value and appreciate about that person.

Closing Words:

Things change.

We change.

Our lives never stand still.

There is always something new.

We are always making transitions,

from one thing to another

one experience to another

one stage of life to another

one challenge to another.

Some transitions are easy,

Some are hard

Some seem almost impossible

Some are exciting and joyful,

Some are painful and frightening.

We change cities and homes.
We change jobs and activities.
We change commitments.
We even change our minds

At this moment, as we extinguish the chalice,
We pause to give thanks for this place
Where our transitions make a difference.
Spiritual life is always in transition.
Beloved community is community in transition.

[Unison]

Together we embrace future transitions.

New people.

New ideas.

New beginnings.

-- Thomas Mickelson & Rev. Jory Agate, adapted (Both are UU ministers)