



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network  
**INTERCONNECTION WITH THE NATURAL WORLD**  
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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?**
- **How does it make you feel?**
- **Can you say more about that?**
- **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:**

**NOTE:** at previous session (and in email reminder) ask participants to bring some small item or memento from nature to this session

## **INTERCONNECTION WITH THE NATURAL WORLD**

*The universe is a continuous web. Touch it at any point and the whole web quivers.*

*~ Stanley Kunitz*

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

This is our 7<sup>th</sup> Principle. As Unitarian Universalists we recognize that we are called by our Principles to live in right relationship with the web of life. Many congregations observe Earth Day, April 22, as we do at Countryside. Across the country, Unitarian Universalists have joined with other people of faith to make personal, congregational, and denominational commitments to support our fragile planet.

Our UU theology helps us know that our role is not to exercise dominion or control over the earth but to stand as stewards of the finely balanced system which sustains all life. We watch with anguish as this delicate web is damaged and life itself threatened by changes to our environment caused by our presence. But perhaps there is something deeper, even more profound than the desire to protect the earth. Perhaps there is something deep, unspoken or even unconscious, at the source of the 7<sup>th</sup> principle. Perhaps the 7<sup>th</sup> principle springs from an intuition about our spiritual relationship to nature and our earth. *~ Janeane Weprin, Countryside UU*

Yesterday I went for a walk in my neighborhood. Not my usual walk. I wanted to check out a fig tree that looked from a distance to be full with fruit. My neighborhood used to be, back in the early twentieth century, filled with fruit tree orchards, and some fruit trees still survive “in the wild”—poking out on the edges of cultivated private property, parks, trails, and along major streets. So with this task in mind, I found myself exploring the back country of one of the public garden parks.

Usually I stick to the main street sidewalk and the trail. With a different goal in mind, I started wandering. Though I didn’t find what I was looking for (the tree turned out not to be a fig), I was surprised by what I learned about where I live. And I’ve been here for ten years! There is the stream-carved gully that is paved over at one point by a major thoroughfare. I found several spots where various species of wildflowers and forgotten cultivars are blooming (wild pea vine flowers, which are everywhere right now, an ancient hydrangea and rose bush, different varieties of ferns, delphinia, and others...), and a small DIY farm in a neighbor’s side yard with chickens. Off the trail, I found a row of blackberry bushes bursting with bounty, some of which I sampled. They’re in a good place where I know they don’t spray and they aren’t exposed to car exhaust.

I also came across some interesting footprints in the soft earth. Not canine, but who or what’s been there?

Returning home I noticed that my perspective on where I live had changed. It almost seemed like a different place than the one I've known for so long. My mind and heart felt oddly more expansive with the new perspective gained simply from getting off the main street and trail and trekking along the edges. That edge between the urban wild and the municipally cultivated. And it wasn't just my perspective on where I lived that changed, but the perspective on where I was.

And this shift in perspective stayed with me. I spent the rest of the day marveling at things normally mundane and habitual. ~ by Elizabeth Sikes

### **QUESTIONS:**

- Is there anything that struck a chord with you in the 2nd reading? Please explain.
- Do you have an early childhood memory of being outdoors and interacting with nature? What was that like for you?
- What do you most enjoy doing now that brings you into the natural world?

### **Sharing:**

Please share the item from nature that you brought with you - Why did you choose it? How do you relate to it?

### **QUESTIONS:**

- When you're trying to sort out difficult situations, do you find it helpful to take a walk outside to get a different perspective? Do you find this change of scenery helpful? Can you explain how?
- What do you usually do to reduce stress in your life?
- Does being outdoors have a spiritual component for you? Does it make you more aware of the interconnected web of life of which we are all a part? How has nature played a role in your spiritual journey?
- When you want to be in a more natural area near home, where do you go? Can you walk there? How often do you go?
- What ways might you find to spend more time in the natural world - or perhaps just to be more aware of and in tune with it?
- What ways have you found to contribute toward the preservation of the natural world?

**As CONVERSATION comes to an end**, you might ask for **final statements/last thoughts on the topic**. *“Do you have a thought from this conversation that you will carry home with you?”*

**CLOSING on next page:**

## **CLOSING:**

Religious naturalism can be either theistic or non-theistic. The theistic naturalist regards God as a force for love and goodness within the natural world. This naturalistic God is not a supernatural being and is usually not thought of as a personal being like the God of the Bible. For example, scientist Stuart Kauffman in his book, *Reinventing the Sacred*, explains that the emergent creativity he finds within nature is what he means by God. He writes:

*Is it, then, more amazing to think that an Abrahamic transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient God created everything around us, all that we participate in, . . . or that it all arose with no transcendent Creator God, all on its own? I believe the latter is so stunning, so overwhelming, so worthy of awe, gratitude and respect that it is God enough for many of us. God, a fully natural God, is the very creativity of the universe. ~ from "Becoming More Fully Human", by William Murry*

**RING CHIME and EXTINGUISH CANDLE** 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.

## **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**

**GUIDED MEDITATION (for use earlier this session if you choose), on next page:**

## GUIDED MEDITATION: (Natural World)

Drops of God  
God, God is water sleeping  
in high-piled clouds.  
She is gentle drink of rain,  
pooling lake, rounding pond,  
angry flooding river.  
She is frothy horse-maned geyser.  
She is glacier on mountains and polar ice  
cap,  
and breath-taking crystalline ideas of  
snowflakes.  
She is frost-dance on trees.  
And we, we are drops of God,  
her tears of joy or sorrow,  
ice crystals  
and raindrops  
in the ocean of her.  
God, God is air wallowing  
all about us,  
She is thin blue atmosphere embracing  
our planet, gentle breeze.  
She is wind and fiercesome gale  
centrifugal force of tornado and hurricane,  
flurry of duststorm.  
She is breath, spirit, life.  
She is thought, intellect, vision and voice.  
And we, we are breaths of God,  
steady and soft,  
changeable and destructive.  
We are her laughter and her sighs,  
atomic movements,  
(sardines schooling)  
in the firmament of her.  
God, God is fire burning,  
day and night.  
She is sting of passion,  
blinking candle,  
heat that cooks our food.  
She is fury forest fire  
and flow of lava which destroys and cre-  
ates, transforms.  
She is home fire and house fire.

She is giving light of sun and  
solemn mirror-face of moon,  
and tiny hopes of stars.  
And we, we are little licking flames  
flickering in her heart,  
in the conflagratory furnace of her.  
God, God is power of earth,  
in and under us.  
She is steady, staying,  
fertile loam, body, matter, tree.  
She is crumbling limestone and shifting  
sand,  
multi-colored marble.  
She is rugged boulder and water-  
smoothed agate,  
she is gold and diamond, gemstone.  
She is tectonic plates and their motion,  
mountains rising over us,  
rumble-snap of earthquake,  
tantrum of volcano.  
She is turning of our day,  
root of being.  
And we, we are pebbles  
and sand grains,  
and tiny landmarks,  
in the endless terrain of her.  
God, God is journal of time marching  
through eternity.  
She is waking of seasons, phases of  
moon,  
movements of stars.  
She is grandmother, mother, daughter.  
She is transcending spiral of ages  
whose every turn encompasses the rest,  
history a mere babe balanced on her hip.  
She is spinning of universes  
and ancestress of infinence.  
She is memory, she is presence, she is  
dream.  
And we, we are brief instants,  
intersections, nanoseconds,  
flashing gold-hoped moments in the eons  
of her.  
God, God is.  
And we, we are. ~ Tess Baumberger