



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network
IN THE MIDDLES: How To Be courageous
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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?"**

IN THE MIDDLES: How To Be courageous

~ from a sermon by Rev. Dr. Elaine Peresluha

I was introduced to Appreciative Inquiry as an organizational development tool that has become my professional specialty- and spiritual practice. AI is a relational concept, based on the belief that when two people take the time to have a conversation, listen to each other, and appreciate the perspective of the other, they will find a place “in the middle” where something new will be discovered that is more creative, and effective than what either person may have believed, or understood on their own.

Henry Nelson Wieman, a philosopher who made his religious home with UUs, believed that the source of any new value, of any human good, is always a creative event that we cannot completely control - and it is marked by something more religious folk would call “grace”. He believed that it is in relationship, in dialogue with another person that ideas and reality are constructed, shaping the experience of the people in relationship through language, or dialogue into a new awareness that either one could not have understood alone. This achievement offers win-win situations where win-lose was the only option. Discovering, collaborating and intimacy replace debating, convincing, and victory or defeat.

I have made it my specialty to appreciate times of uncertainty - transitions, “middles” - as sacred moments, divine opportunities, to savor.

Nobody likes “middles” - whether we are there by choice or by chance. We much prefer predictability, competence, clarity, and closure, all of which are distinctly absent in times of change. This is what can make a middle feel bad.

What I have learned to appreciate is that being in a place that feels bad does not mean anything is wrong. Feeling uncomfortable does not mean that anyone did anything wrong. It does not mean we are incompetent. Middles are supposed to be uncomfortable and unpredictable. They create a distinct lack of clarity- precisely because something new is required.

This congregation is in a middle - staff changes, financial uncertainty. Our nation is in a middle - political and environmental uncertainty- plastic bags- or paper; Tar sands oil, fracking- or not; health care reform- or not. Gun control- or not. Our world is in the middle- between caring for self- or another, between the needs of a few- or the needs of the many, assuring food, water, shelter for a population soon to be 9 billion.

Whether our middles are personal, small, or global, our hearts want to know what to do - want to take action - when being in any middle requires the courage to be patient, present, appreciating, not knowing - without blaming someone for doing something wrong, without clinging to what is familiar.

The courageous heart listens to the other, finds a common thread, practices not knowing and waits for the right question to be asked, and the creative answer to be discovered.

The courageous heart holds on to what is good while making room for the other.

The courageous heart is willing to give up being right to be in relationship. The mantra of the courageous heart is, **“I could be wrong. I could be wrong.”** The enemy becomes a guest and we create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and peace fully experienced. Something new is created in the middle of what has been.

Somewhere in between where we have been and where we are going, there is an opportunity for some new realization or creation to be revealed. In the relationship between what is and what can be, exists the fertile territory for anything to be imagined or to be discovered. Creativity happens in the middle.

Courageous hearts choose, in each and every moment, to serve something greater than self, in spite of fear, judgment or pride. Courageous hearts continue steadfastly, consistently, predictably and dependably doing what they are supposed to do - what they can do - to remember that behind all appearances, beyond any illusion of separateness - We Are One. We Are Love.

QUESTIONS:

- Share an experience you have with “middles”, or periods of uncertainty - in what ways did you deal with these?
- Can you think of a time that you said, “I could be wrong”, when you believed you were right. How did this make you feel? What response did you get?
- Do you feel you need courage to “invite the enemy as a guest”?

Elaborate on AI thinking:

AI is based on simple premise that human systems grow in the direction of what we repeatedly ask questions about and focus our attention on. **Search for the “best of what is”**. Questions and dialogues about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational.

In any situation we can find the seeds of excellence to build on. Change begins the moment we ask questions. The very first questions asked set the stage for what is “found” and what is “discovered”. This data becomes the stories out of which the future is conceived, discussed, and constructed. **Dream of “what might be”**.

We build excellence by seeking out examples and sharing stories. As we create images of excellence, we will move toward that image. **Design the vision of the future and Innovate “what will be”**.

QUESTION:

Can you think of a situation coming up in your life where you can apply “AI” thinking?

As CONVERSATION comes to an end, you might ask for **last thoughts on the topic:**

“Do you have a thought from this conversation that you will carry home with you?”

CLOSING: Ask volunteer who brought a Closing, to read it to the group.

RING CHIME and EXTINGUISH CANDLE (Choose one of these or one of your choice):

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.

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*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**

