

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website  
SMALL GROUP SESSION  
“The Past” and “The Now”  
First Universalist Church, UU, Auburn, ME, The Rev. Glenn Turner

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING

“What day is it?”

It's today," squeaked Piglet.

My favorite day," said Pooh.”

— A.A. Milne

“Learn from yesterday, live for today, look to tomorrow, rest this afternoon.”

— Charles M. Schulz, Charlie Brown's Little Book of Wisdom

SILENT REFLECTION

CHECK-IN: (40-50 minutes)

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 five minutes each. If there is time remaining, additional sharing and responses are welcome.

FOCUS: “The Past” and “The Now”

Caroline and I go round and round about the past and present, not so much about the future. A friend writes me and says: "And I know that while past things don't change--though they often only get better in memory--dwelling on them can contribute to our missing out on the present." Right. Past things don't change. But our perception of past things changes constantly. The past is always in flux in terms of our knowledge and understanding of it, and of how, as we think about it, it influences our behavior in the present. So much of Buddhist thought and meditation teaches one how to live in the NOW. And, into that NOW flows a steady stream of images, thoughts, feelings, all of which come out of our stored memories - the PAST. This present moment, if that were all there was, would be almost devoid of meaning. No bearings, no moorings. One huge explosion of sensory data. What we know of the past is a filter against the present moment, allowing us to select what is meaningful in it. Of course, the filter also functions like blinders, our upbringing, education, and experience (or lack of it) informing or misinforming us. When my friend says that dwelling on the past can only contribute to our missing out on the present, that's not the whole story despite the element of truth in it. Emerson very much wanted to sever the American experience, or rather EXPERIENCE itself, from Europe and from tradition. At the same time he steeped himself in Eastern philosophy and wisdom. And what came out of that was American transcendentalism, filtered by German Transcendentalism which the Germans got from their translating the scriptures of the East. The NOW mediated by THEN. How could it be otherwise?

The real question is: In what way does dwelling on the past keep us from a healthy engagement in the present? But, again, even as I consider that, for me the present moment seems vitally engaged in a constant dialogue between the interlocking dynamism of past and present. The symbol of the Tao, the yin and yang refers to that dynamism as well. You could consider that the present is mediated by the past. The present is also our opportunity to come to a different understanding of it. There are so many ways to dice this. Hence philosophy, theology, history, etc.

## Discussion questions:

What are the touchstones from your past that you draw upon that still feed your spirit today? People, events, books, scriptures, events, history? What themes or lessons from the past carry over to today?

What experiences have you had that are like timeless moments, that you can draw inspiration from, validation, hope.

What helps you settle into the "NOW?" How do you focus your awareness to be present in the moment? Do you do it through meditation, prayer, reflection? Do you prepare yourself to be present in the moment: meeting someone, listening to another, reading a book, sitting quietly? Are you aware of the voices of the past that either enter like a dialogue or draw you away from being in the NOW? Do you think it is even possible to experience something in the world as though for the first time?

## LIKES AND WISHES

### CLOSING WORDS:

Let us hold this paradoxical thought by Carolyn McDade:

"Roots hold me close; wings set me free,  
Spirt of Life, come to me, come to me."