



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network

## **STOPPING TO REFLECT ON A SNOWY DAY**

Small Group Conversations, Anne Bailey coordinator

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**Universalist Church of West Hartford, CT**

**(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:**

## STOPPING TO REFLECT ON A SNOWY DAY by Dick Allen, Jan. 2015

*Among twenty snowy mountains, / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird.*  
— Wallace Stevens

In the second stanza of Connecticut poet Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Stevens has his narrator say, "*I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds.*"

When a major snowstorm is predicted for the Northeast, I think we are of two minds.

On one level, we deplore the snow, its inconvenience, how it will interrupt us, its danger.

On a truer level, we may be elated.

There's a feeling of relief and glee that most Northeasterners have when we hear the announcement of an expected major snowstorm. Forget your troubles, c'mon get happy.

...

At least for its duration, a major snowstorm will give us an excuse to do, well, nothing. We shall be set aside for a day or two, treated not unkindly, and released without having suffered real harm.

Or perhaps we shall be emailed by friends and relatives from less snowy realms, who want to get in on our experience (Wisconsin writes: "You two all right? Just checking in to see if you are weathering the blizzard without any power-related disasters, or any other kind. Please drop me a pixel to reassure me ... . With concern —")

If we were lucky enough to get to Trader Joe's before the shelves went bare, we can now eat an entire Trader Giotto's Pizza Parlanno without much guilt.

Snowbound, our stress levels will drop. We can sit at the window and watch blackbirds. We can putter around the house, remember or listen to parents or grandparents as they remember ...

... I remember when I was a newspaper boy in a small town of the 1950s, delivering newspapers to 68 houses. The snow was 3 feet deep and drifting. My usual half-hour route on a Shelby bike took me two hours trudging on foot that morning. But I did it, feeling the happiness of accomplishment against odds. Afterward there was hot chocolate.

I remember sledding in the snow on a curvy hill beneath streetlights, a gang of boys and girls on Flexible Flyers, whooping to each other as we sped down. Then the long walk back up the hill, pulling our sleds behind us, tasting snow on our tongues.

I remember one morning with a small microscope, testing that "no one snowflake is like any other." After an hour of looking at snowflakes on my blue mittens, it seemed to be true.

I recall my foolish adolescence. In a snowstorm, driving an icy road, I slammed on the brakes of my father's Ford station wagon. The Ford did a 360-degree spin. The girl beside me screamed.

I remember walking in white pine forests covered with snow, taking slow steps with my galoshes, being enraptured.

And the song, "Walking in a Winter Wonderland."

I think of John Greenleaf Whittier's poem, "Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyll." It starts wonderfully but goes on so long describing a snowbound New England that almost no modern reader finishes its 17 pages.

There was a wonderful small-town snowball fight among pre-teens that lasted over from dusk into night, no one winning or losing, the snow falling steadily on everyone and everything — especially on the gingerbread of the cottages and the eaves and porches of old Victorian houses.

All of which is to say that it is the prospect of snow that may bring on understandable sentiment and nostalgia. A snowstorm may well calm us.

How disappointing it is, then — what a letdown — if the storm doesn't fulfill our expectations. We feign relief that it wasn't as bad as predicted or expected. But inside, for many of us, it will be like listening to the radio or watching television on a school day as the snow lessens — "No! No!" — and hearing that there will be only a two-hour delay. The buses will roll. We shall have to study, to get back to work after all.

Stevens ends his poem:

*It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.*

How calm those few words sound, how quiet, poignant, inevitable, accepting. How terribly we at the start of the 21st century long to be taken out of ourselves, to escape, to remember or at least imagine simpler times.

... times when the snow transformed and changed us, when it might cleanse us all once again, when it fell. ~ Dick Allen, Connecticut State Poet Laureate.

## **QUESTIONS:**

After this winter of few storms, what comes to your mind as you read this piece?

Is there something that especially connects with you, or brings forth memories?

Do you find you experience a range of feelings when a big storm comes - do the hassles begin to outweigh the excitement and delights as the storm arrives and then abates?

Which memories/feelings stay with you the longest?

Where did you grow up? What memories do you have of winter storms in your youth?

Do you feel differently about winter storms now, than you did in your younger years? In what ways?

Do you think you'll stay in "snow country" through your retirement?

How can we build a "Snow Day" mentality into our non-snow day lives? What are some ways we can give ourselves permission to take a day off - a day without "shoulds"?

**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: (have read by a volunteer in group):**

The first fall of snow is not only an event, it is a magical event. You go to bed in one kind of world and wake up in another quite different, and if this is not enchantment, where is it to be found? ~ J. B. Priestley

**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.*

OR

*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.*

OR

*May we value our shared reflections and take away new understandings of ourselves, each other, and our being together. Thank you for sharing your story. Thank you for creating a place of safety. Thank you for listening with appreciation.*

**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**