

## AN INTRODUCTION TO “SOUL MATTERS” PARTICIPANT PACKET

*There is a quality of listening that is possible among a circle of human beings, who by their attentiveness to one another create a space in which each person is able to give voice to the truth of his or her life. There is the miracle of authentic narrative, made possible by listening that holds still long enough to let the truth be told. Where there is this kind of listening and speaking, a new kind of community is born - a community of life.*

- Rebecca Parker, Unitarian Universalist theologian

*I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place.*

- Rufus Jones, Quaker historian & theologian

### *The Purpose of “Soul Matters” Small Group Ministry*

#### **1) We Help Each Other Become The People We Most Want To Be.**

Unitarian Universalism is about connection. We are a religion that sees people struggling, not against our own sinful souls, but against a shallow, frantic and materialistic world that all-too-often leaves us disconnected from our deepest selves, life’s gifts and needs greater than one’s own.

*And so our congregation, UUCNC, works to heal that divide by helping each other connect, with courage, through faith, love, and service to build among and beyond ourselves a caring and compassionate community.*

Soul Matters supports this mission of helping us to connect and to build a caring community by offering its participants:

- Formative space & circles of learning, support and challenge
- Opportunities for spiritual deepening and practice
- An intimate home within a larger church community

...so we become the people we want to be.

In other words, Soul Matters is about *becoming*.

#### **2) We Create ~ Formative Space.**

*The core purpose of Soul Matters is to create formative space for individuals. This is a space of acceptance and safety in which group members can explore their deepest values and inner voice without judgment or coercion. The below reading explains the power and importance of this sacred space.*

#### *The Soul is Shy: The Importance of Deep Listening and Formative Space*

*Parker J. Palmer, from A Hidden Wholeness*

So what do we do in a circle of trust? We speak our own truth; we listen receptively to the truth of others; we ask each other honest, open questions instead of giving counsel; and we offer each other the healing and empowering gifts of silence and laughter... Our purpose is not to teach anyone anything but to give the inner teacher a chance to teach us.

Spaces designed to welcome the soul and support the inner journey are rare. But the principles and practices that shape such spaces are neither new nor untested. Some are embedded in monastic tradition, for the monastery is the archetypal "community of solitudes." Some emerged over four hundred years of Quaker faith and practice. Some were revived in the transpersonal psychology movement of the mid-twentieth century. And some are embodied in the processes of spiritual formation that can be found at the heart of most of the world's great wisdom traditions.

"Formation" may be the best name for what happens in a circle of trust, because the word refers, historically, to soul-work done in a communal setting. But a quick disclaimer is in order, since "formation" sometimes means a process in which the pressure of orthodox doctrine, sacred text, and institutional authority is applied to the misshapen soul in order to conform it to the shape dictated by some theology. This approach is rooted in the idea that we are born with souls deformed by sin, and our situation is hopeless until the authorities "form" us properly.

But all of that is turned upside down by the principles of a circle of trust. In a circle of trust, formation flows from the belief that we are born with souls in perfect form. As time goes on, we are subject to powers of deformation, from within as well as without, that twist us into shapes quite different from the shape of the soul. But the soul never loses its original form, and never stops calling us back to our birthright integrity.

In a circle of trust, the powers of deformation are held at bay long enough for the soul to emerge and speak its truth. Here, we are not required to conform ourselves to some external template. Instead, we are invited to conform our lives to the shape of our own souls. In a circle of trust we can grow our selfhood like a plant—from the potential within the seed of the soul, in ground made fertile by the quality of our relationships, toward the light of our own wholeness—trusting the soul to know its own shape better than any external authority ever can.

### **3) We Embrace ~ A Theology of Connection**

#### **The Soul Matters approach is central to our Unitarian Universalist Theology**

*Our Unitarian Universalist theology is complex and yet at the same time it can also be boiled down to a single focus on healing spiritual disconnection. To put it simply, our congregations gather to heal disconnection by listening to our deepest selves, opening to life's gifts and serving needs greater than our own. Soul Matters is a container in which we explore the genuine meaning of this theology in our lives. Below are five distinctive attributes of our Soul Matters program. They are our way of supporting this journey toward a deeper connection with ourselves, the mystery of life, and others.*

#### **A) Soul Matters is Rooted in a Theology Focused on Spiritual Connection.**

Some of us grew up in a Christian context galvanized around the theological idea of sin. From such a perspective, one looks out at the world and notices people struggling with a sense of themselves and the wider human community as tragically flawed, and even in some cases, impure. Thus, religious communities grounded in this perspective see their primary gift to the world as forgiveness, or in some cases, a means to purity.

We Unitarian Universalists see the world from a different perspective. When we look out, what we notice most are the many people struggling with spiritual disconnection. We see ourselves and many around us hungering to re-connect with their deepest selves, life's gifts and needs greater than their own. Helping people with this struggle is the focus on Unitarian Universalism and our congregation. And so we speak of the job of the congregation as offering people lifelines, captured simply in a phrase from our mission/vision statement: "to connect, courageously, and to build a caring community."

This is what we are about: we heal spiritual disconnection by helping people connect to their deepest selves and to one another, and to build a caring community, among and beyond ourselves. With this theology in mind, many of us are moved by the way spiritual writer and small group

advocate, Parker Palmer, talks about small groups as helping people survive “the blizzard of the world.” He writes, “ There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door of their house out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.

“Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others.

We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives. The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some of us are lost at this moment and are trying to find our way home. Some are lost without knowing it. Some of us have just reached for the rope. Others are in the middle of the journey trying to keep hold of our grip. Others have just arrived home.

“My own experience of the blizzard, which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that the soul's order and life's hope can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the common compassion of friends, that rope is always close at hand, ... offering, time after time, the chance to regain our bearings...and find our way home again.--*From A Hidden Wholeness*

The gift of Parker Palmer's words is to remind us that we all on some level are struggling to find our way back home--to what we care most deeply about and who we most want to be. So Soul Matters is not just “an evening of good discussion” or “an opportunity for intellectual stimulation” or even “ a chance to meet new friends.” At its best, it is a path back home.

## **B) Soul Matters is an Opportunity to Explore the Worship Themes in More Depth (and get the bonus of spiritual connection to the church as a whole)**

Soul Matters is not a “stand alone” program. It is inextricably connected to the worship life of our congregation by providing group members with opportunities to explore our congregation's monthly worship themes in more depth. Besides helping us go deeper, this has the added benefit of connecting us to the wider church community. I may not be in your Soul Matters group, but since we are dealing with the same theme, we have a point of connection that allows us to feel part of the same journey (and even strike up a conversation a bit more easily!)

It is important to stress that Soul Matters groups are *not* sermon discussion groups. The goal is not to explore *the sermons* in more depth, but to explore *the monthly theme* in more depth. Having the sermons in the background enriches the experience, but they are not the focus. The focus is on the monthly questions and a spiritual exercises, which provide a different kind of experience than worship offers. And that leads us to the next distinctive aspect of Soul Matters:

## **C) Soul Matters is an Invitation to Experience the Worship Theme, Not Just Talk about It**

Unitarian Universalists want to do more than just read and talk about spiritual topics. Provocative readings are important. Thinking about and discussing a topic is important. But there is nothing like experiential learning. Indeed many of us learn and process concepts best through direct experience.

Given this, group members are given a “spiritual exercise” each month to engage prior to the meeting. For instance, when we wrestled with the concept of grace, we didn't just read what theologians had to say about it, we also challenged ourselves to find a way to bring grace (a gift one doesn't expect, earn or even deserve) into another person's life. We did the same with the topic of prayer; we didn't just read theories and perspectives on prayer, we challenged ourselves to find a new way to pray (or even try prayer for the first time!).

These spiritual exercises differ radically month to month. Sometimes they are profound and involved. Other times, simple and playful. Sometimes members report having “the most moving experience of my life.” Other times, they come in and say “I’m not sure that worked for me, but it did make me realize...” No matter what, we ask members to try the exercises, believing that—whether you “enjoyed” it or not—the experience of doing it will help you learn something about life and yourself--something that sitting in a room just thinking about the topic never could.

One last thought: we’ve recently begun to think of our spiritual exercises as koans. In Zen practice, koan’s are thought of as “unanswerable questions.” The point is not to “figure it out” or “find the right answer.” In fact, many spiritual questions cannot be answered by the rational mind but must be experienced. The meaning is in the engagement, wherever that engagement leads. They take us on a journey whose destination is neither right or wrong, but always enriching. At their best, this is what our spiritual exercises do for us.

It is also important to stress the difference between spritual exercises and spirital practice. Our monthly exercises are are not intended to take the place of on-going, even daily practices that center us. They suppliment our practices and ask us to delve deeper.

#### **D) Soul Matters Offers Questions To Walk With, Not Talk Through.**

Soul Matters also takes a unique approach to questions. Most small group material includes discussion questions. In this traditional model, questions serve as group tools to keep the discussion focused and structured. Soul Matters uses questions differently. We see them as tools for *individual* exploration.

Instead of asking our groups to go through the questions one by one and discussion them, we invite group members to read all the questions ahead of time and find the one or two questions that “hook them”--that speak to them in some dramatic or challenging way. We then invite the group members to “live with” or “walk with” that question for the few weeks leading up to the group. One way to put this is to say: “Find the question that hooks you and let it take you on a ride.” Group members then come to the meeting, not with an answer to each of the questions on the list, but with a story about the one or two questions that spoke to them and lead to deeper, personal learning. In this sense, the questions serve as an additional spiritual exercise, another experiential exercise prior to the group that helps them connect the theme with their daily living or personal history.

#### **E) Soul Matters is a Reminder That UUism is Distinctive, Not an “Anything Goes” Religion**

Each month, our theme focuses us on a spiritual value that our faith tradition has historically honored and emphasized. So with each meeting, we are reminded that our faith dreams of a preferred way for us to be in the world, challenging each of us to ask **“What does it mean to live a life with these particular values front and center?”** There’s an important reminder here: Unitarian Universalism is *not* a religion of “anything goes.” Rather our faith has a unique vision of the good life. Yes, we affirm personal choice and individuality, but there are some core values that our faith asks all of us to engage, take seriously and apply to our daily living.

## **4) We Create ~ Community**

*In Soul Matters we engage each other in a covenantal relationship. So we commit to honoring a particular format and clear relational commitments during our group meetings. Through these promises to each other, we find meaning and connection. Below is the format and covenant we use to accomplish this.*

**Meeting Format** Meetings usually last 2 hours and follow this structure:

**Opening:** Chalice Lighting and Centering Words. Facilitators offer opening words from a favorite poet/writer or by using a small section of the readings that were assigned for that month. Some leaders offer meditative words

or a prayer. There are lots of ways to do this. Each group finds what fits them best.

**Brief Check-In:** Members briefly share what is going on in their lives. The goal is to get beyond chitchat and do more than “catch up.” The technique that is most often used is to ask members to briefly share “how it is with your spirit” by commenting on one thing that is “pulling at or draining your spirit” and one thing that is “feeding, filling or lifting up your spirit.” Each member usually takes only a couple minutes to share. This part of the meeting typically it takes no more 20 minutes.

**Discussion of the Spiritual Exercise:** Discussions start with members sharing their experience of doing the spiritual exercise. Common questions that facilitators ask are: “What was it like for you to attempt the exercise?” “Did it lead to any unexpected feelings or insights?” “Did it go as you expected?” “How did it challenge, change or deepen your understanding of this month’s theme?”

This is where we work hard to practice deep listening. To start, there is no back and forth conversation. Instead group members focus on listening and providing each other with the formative space to hear ourselves think or, as Parker Palmer puts it, to let our shy soul speak. It is only after everyone has had a chance to share, that the facilitator opens the floor and invites members into a time of reflective conversation. This is when members speak from their own experience, and comment on the connections they saw between each other’s stories and experiences. A common question at this point is: “How did listening to everyone else help you see or learn something new about your own story?”

This is absolutely *not* a time to offer advice or argue about who’s right. We follow the guidelines of “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!”

**Discussion of the “Questions To Wrestle With”:** We don’t treat these questions like “homework.” We do not engage every single one. Instead, participants look them over a couple weeks ahead of time and find the one that “hooks” them most. Then they let that question take them “on a ride.” They live with it for a while and allow it to regularly break into--and break open--their ordinary thoughts. And then we come to our Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with our group.

**Check-Out:** Meetings end by each member briefly sharing a statement of gratitude. Facilitators ask participants to think about what they’ve experienced together that evening and then lift up one comment or experience for which they are particularly grateful.

**Closing:** Groups end by extinguishing the chalice and sharing a closing reading or offering closing words.

**Join our Soul Matters Facebook group at:** [www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/)  
Learn about and share with Soul Matters groups in UU congregations across the U.S.!

## **Group Covenant**

*A covenant is a list of the ways we agree to be together as a group. The idea of covenant is central to Unitarian Universalism. Historically, we've been a covenantal religion rather than a creedal religion. In other words, we are bound by the way we promise to treat each other, rather than by common beliefs and creeds. So forming a covenant isn't just good group technique, it is a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.*

*When starting a new group, a group covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. Facilitators also promise to have the group revisit and re-affirm the covenant yearly. The following covenant is popular among our Soul Matters groups. Most groups end up adopting it as is, but every group is encouraged to adapt it to its unique characteristics and desired ways of being together.*

### **Soul Matters Group Covenant Template**

**As group members,**

***Before our meetings, we agree to:***

- make meetings a priority, including being on time.
- contact one of the co-facilitators ahead of time if we are unable to attend.
- read the material and engage the assigned spiritual exercise.

***During our meetings, we agree to:***

- practice deep listening, offering each other time to share without interruption.
- the practice of “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!” during times of discussion and cross-talk.
- monitor the length and frequency of our own participation so all members have opportunities to speak.
- speak for ourselves and try to speak from both the heart and the intellect.
- make time to say good bye when a member decides to leave the group.
- periodically revisit, edit and re-affirm this covenant as a group.

***After our meetings, we agree to:***

- follow up with other members as needed, especially anyone who miss a meeting without notice to make sure they are okay.
- respect the privacy of group members by keeping personal information confidential.
- keep each other in our prayers and hearts, reaching out to each other in tangible ways to ensure that we are a caring community for one another. *[Name your groups particular promises and strategies here]*
- actively keep a look out for other church members who might need and fit with our group, recognizing that inviting is the job of us all and a way of expressing our gratitude for the gifts we've found through our group. We will make sure potential new members are introduced to our group facilitator so they can go over the New Participant Packet with them.

**As the facilitator, I will...**

- start and end meetings on time.
- make sure all voices are heard.
- help the group be a circle of caring and concern.
- ensure that another group member facilitates if I cannot attend.
- ensure that the group periodically revisits and re-affirms this covenant.
- let the group know in advance that a new member will be joining the group.
- welcome new members with intentionality by personally meeting with them to go over the New Participant Packet to make sure they are comfortable with and agree to our process.
- ensure we make time for the group to say good-bye to members who leave.