

JOURNEY GROUP PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE and COVENANT

Journey Groups are about *becoming*; they are a setting in which we can help each other become the best we can 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 world often leaves us disconnected from our deepest selves, life's gifts, and needs greater than one's own. UUs work to heal that divide by helping each other listen to our deepest selves, open up to life's gifts and serve needs beyond ourselves. Journey Groups support this mission by offering participants:

- formative space and circles of learning, support, and challenge
- opportunities for spiritual deepening and practice
- an intimate home within a larger congregational community

Journey Groups are a Circle of Trust

The core purpose of Journey Groups is to create a space of acceptance and safety in which group members can explore their deepest values and inner voice *without judgment or coercion* – a circle of trust.

What we do in this circle of trust is well described in “The Soul is Shy: The Importance of Deep Listening and Formative Space” by Parker J. Palmer from *A Hidden Wholeness*. It forms the basis for how we are asked to approach a journey group:

“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; 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”

Here, we are not required to conform ourselves to some external template. Instead, we are invited to shape our lives by 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.”

We are all, on some level, struggling to find our way home to what we care most deeply about and who we most want to be. Journey Groups are not just “good discussion” or “intellectual stimulation” or even “a chance to meet new friends.” They are a road home.

Experience the Theme

It is interesting to read and discuss spiritual topics, but there is nothing like experiential learning. Many of us learn and process concepts best through direct experience. Many spiritual questions cannot be answered by the rational mind and must be experienced. The meaning is in the engagement, wherever that engagement leads. They take us on a journey whose destination is neither right nor wrong, but always enriching. At their best, this is what our spiritual exercises do for us.

Each month there is a “spiritual exercise” to engage in prior to the meeting to help us connect with the theme in a more experiential way. Exercises differ radically month to month. Sometimes they will turn out to be “the most moving experience of my life.” Other times, people might say, “I’m not sure that worked for me, but it did make me realize...” No matter what, we ask everyone 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.

These spiritual exercises can be thought of as *koans* which, in Zen practice, are “unanswerable questions.” The point is not to “figure it out” or “find the right answer.”

A Theology of Connection

The Journey Group approach is central to our Unitarian Universalist Theology. Our congregations gather to heal disconnection by listening to our deepest selves, opening to life’s gifts and serving needs greater than our own. Journey Groups are a container in which we explore the genuine meaning of this theology in our lives.

The five distinctive attributes of the Journey Groups program supports this journey toward a deeper connection with our selves, the mystery of life, and others.

Journey Groups are:

1. rooted in a theology focused on spiritual connection
2. an opportunity to explore the worship themes in more depth (and get the bonus of spiritual connection to the congregation as a whole)
3. an invitation to *experience* the worship theme, not just talk about it
4. a reminder that UUism is distinctive, and not an “anything goes” religion
5. an offering of questions to walk with, not walk through

Journey Groups as Community

In Journey Groups we engage each other in a covenantal relationship. So we commit to honouring a particular format and behavioural commitments during our group meetings. Below is the format and covenant we use to accomplish this.

Meetings usually last 2 hours and follow this structure:

1. *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.
2. *Brief Check-In:* Members briefly share what is going on in their lives. The goal is not to be a “catch up” but to allow members to comment briefly on one thing that is pulling at or draining your spirit and one thing that is feeding, filling or lifting up your spirit.
3. *Discussion of the Spiritual Exercise:* Members share what it was like for them to do the spiritual exercise. This is a time of deep listening, without back-and-forth conversation. This is absolutely not a time to offer advice or argue about who’s right – there is no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!
4. *Discussion of the Questions To Wrestle With:* Participants do not engage every single one, but find the one that hooks them most. After living with it for days or weeks, they come to the meeting prepared to share their thoughts with their group.
5. *Check-Out:* Each member briefly shares a comment or experience for which they are particularly grateful from their experience in the group.
6. *Closing:* Groups end by extinguishing the chalice and sharing a closing reading or offering closing words.

Covenant

A covenant states how we agree to be together as a group. Covenants are central to Unitarian Universalism, a covenantal religion rather than a creedal religion. We are bound by how we promise to treat each other, not by common beliefs and creeds.

JOURNEY GROUP COVENANT

May we endeavour to be present as fully as possible. May we be here with our doubts, fears and failings as well as with our convictions, joys and successes; our listening as well as our speaking. May we have the wisdom to understand ourselves, and the strength to keep this space safe, loving and supportive of our growth.

We covenant:

- to honour that our speaking is always invitational and that we can always pass
- to honour each other with attentive listening and reflective quiet, free of judgment
- to refrain from asking questions, interrupting, advising, or engaging in cross-talk
- to respect the privacy of group members by keeping all of our sharing confidential
- to monitor the length and frequency of our own participation so all members have opportunities to speak
- to share with honesty and depth as we are moved, speaking for ourselves from both the heart and the intellect
- to be a caring community, carrying each other in our hearts, and reaching out to each other in tangible ways
- to be mindful that, if we wish to pursue something a person has shared in the group outside our formal group time, we should first ask whether that person is willing to extend the discussion. (This point to be discussed with the group at the beginning of the year or when a new member joins.)
- to honour our commitments to attendance, punctuality, reading the material and engaging in the spiritual exercise
- to contact the facilitator ahead of time if we are unable to attend
- to make time to say good-bye when a member decides to leave the group
- to periodically revisit, edit, and reaffirm this covenant as a group