



soul matters

Soul Matters Circle Participant Guide

*Unitarian Universalist
Community of the Mountains*

September 12, 2018

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
theologian

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

- Rufus Jones, Quaker historian & theologian

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WELCOME!

Participants are the essential fiber of our Soul Matters Circles

Thank you for participating in a Circle this year!

This guide is designed to familiarize you with the basic philosophy and practices of Soul Matters Circles, and to serve as a reference throughout the cycle.

Soul Matters Circles are similar to groups you may have participated in at UUCM in the past: As with covenant and chalice groups, Soul Matters Circles are circles of trust that encourage us to get to know each other better and strengthen the community feeling at UUCM.

Soul Matters Circles are different, too. One obvious change is the expectation that in addition to the time they spend together as a group, each member of a Circle commits to exploring specific material (the “packet”) about the month’s topic on their own and to experimenting with the suggested exercises in their own lives. Rather than “discuss the topic,” we gather to share the impact the material has had on each of us. These are the same themes that the entire congregation is exploring in Sunday services.

Please take time soon to review the information in this guide, where we share some of the concepts that will help make your Soul Matters Circle experience successful and meaningful.

Perhaps you will have questions about it. Your facilitator is a great resource regarding whatever puzzles or concerns you.

Again, *Welcome!*

Why?

Helping 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 congregations work to heal that divide by helping us listen to our deepest selves, open to life's gifts, and serve needs greater than our own. Soul Matters Circles support this mission of helping people listen, open, and serve by offering its participants:

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

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

In other words, Soul Matter Circles are about becoming.

How?

We Create Formative Space

The core purpose of Soul Matters Circles 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 judgement or coercion. The reading below explains the power and importance of this sacred space.

As Parker Palmer asks in *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.” [They draw on monastic tradition, Quaker practice, and transpersonal psychology, among other sources.]

“In a circle of trust, [there is space for] the soul to emerge and speak its truth. Here... we are invited to... 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.”

Principles

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. (*Throughout, if the word “spiritual” doesn’t speak to you, please let it pass on by.*) 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 Circles create 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.

1. Soul Matters is Rooted in a Theology Focused on Spiritual Connection.

When we Unitarian Universalists look out at the world, what we notice most are the many people struggling with spiritual disconnection. We see ourselves and many around us hungering to reconnect with their deepest selves, life’s gifts and needs greater than their own. Helping people with this struggle is the focus of Unitarian Universalism and our congregation. And so, we speak of the job of the congregation as offering people three lifelines, captured simply in the phrase: “Listen, Open, Serve” - we heal spiritual disconnection by helping people listen to their deepest selves, open to life’s gifts and serve needs greater than their own.

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.”

In “*A Hidden Wholeness*,” 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.

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 but] that rope is always close at hand, ...offering, time after time, the chance to regain our bearings...and find our way home again.”

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.**

2. Soul Matters is an Opportunity to Explore the Service Themes in More Depth. (and get the bonus of spiritual connection to the congregation as a whole)

Soul Matters is not a “stand alone” program. It is inextricably connected to the life of our congregation by providing group members with opportunities to explore our congregation’s monthly themes in more depth.

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. The focus is on the monthly questions and spiritual exercises, which provide a different kind of experience than Sunday services offer.

3. Soul Matters is an Invitation to Experience the Theme, Not Just Talk about It.

Unitarian Universalists want to do more than just read and talk about spiritual topics. These are important, but there is nothing like experiential learning.

With this in mind, group members are offered a set of “spiritual exercises” from which to choose each month to engage prior to the meeting. For instance, when wrestling with the concept of grace, (a gift one doesn’t expect or earn) we wouldn’t just read what theologians had to say about it, we might also challenge ourselves to find a way to bring grace into another person’s life. With the topic of forgiveness; we wouldn’t just read theories and perspectives on forgiveness, we might challenge ourselves to find one small step we can take toward forgiving ourselves or someone else.

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.

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

4. 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 that 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 discuss 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 circle members connect the theme with their daily living or personal history.

5. 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.

Creating Community: Practical Matters

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

Service Projects

One of the primary purposes of Soul Matters Circles is "living our values" - participants are invited to collaborate in a service project that will benefit the church community, the neighborhood, or the larger society. The facilitator will introduce or solicit service project ideas for the group's consideration once the group has solidified. Soul Matters Circles are expected to perform one service project each cycle.

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 how we are held together in community.

When starting a new Circle, a group covenant is one of the first things discussed and affirmed. The covenant may, of course, be revised later, at the group's discretion. The following covenant is popular among Soul Matters Circles. 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.

A Soul Matters Circle Covenant Template

As group members...

Before our meetings, we agree to:

- make meetings a priority, including being on time.
- contact one of the 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.
- honor the practice of "no fixing, no saving, no advising!" 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.

After our meetings, we agree to:

- keep personal information shared in the Circle confidential. We respect each other's privacy, and do not repeat information we hear within the Circle.
- keep each other in our hearts and prayers, reaching out to each other in tangible ways to ensure that we are a caring community for one another.
- encourage other members/friends who express an interest in Soul Matters Circles to speak with the minister or a Circle facilitator.

IMPORTANT: *There is an exception to the confidentiality rule and this exception is to be clearly stated to the participants at the outset.* In the case of a serious problem being described by a participant or troubling behavior being observed, the facilitator is encouraged to discuss the situation with the minister. The severity or urgency of the matter should dictate the response. The facilitator may have to go as far as naming the person involved in discussion with the minister, and if raised in a facilitators' meeting, all care should be taken to protect the anonymity of the participant by omitting details and identifiers as much as possible. ***If someone appears at risk of physically hurting themselves or someone else, the facilitator will let the minister know, with or without the Circle member's permission.***

Circle Format

All Soul Matters Circles use the same basic format. Facilitators are asked to remain flexible, to attend to the particular needs of a given group while still honoring the spirit and value of the usual Circle outline. Throughout the Circle, reflective pauses between individual sharings are expected and encouraged.

Opening Chalice Lighting, Centering Words and/or Song.

The Facilitator or a Circle member offers opening words from a favorite poet/writer or by using a small section of the readings that were assigned for the month. Some leaders offer meditative words or a prayer, or invite singing. There are lots of ways to do this. Each group finds what fits them best.

(Pause)

Brief Check-In

Members briefly share what is going on in their lives. The goal is to get beyond chit-chat 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."

(Pause)

Discussion of the Spiritual Exercise

Discussions start with members sharing their experience of doing the spiritual exercise. 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 there is a time for 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.

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!"

Throughout the discussion period, reflective pauses between individual sharings are expected and encouraged.

(Pause)

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.

(Pause)

Announcements and brief group business

Check-Out

Meetings end by each member reflecting on the Circle just experienced and briefly sharing. It may be a statement of gratitude for something experienced during the Circle, a feeling present in the person in that moment, a wondering or question that a person is carrying with them from the Circle

(Pause)

Closing

Circle gatherings conclude with a reading, closing words or a closing song and the extinguishing of the chalice.

What are some of a Facilitator's Responsibilities?

Perhaps you are wondering what the facilitators have been asked to do. These are the commitments they each made...

- Attend the periodic Facilitators gatherings.
- Read and experience each monthly packet.
- Help your Circle choose a group project.

Running Meetings

- Model good listening, caring for others, and emotionally honest, personal sharing.
- Start and end meetings on time.
- Make sure every Circle includes an empty chair.
- Maintain a safe environment.
- Make sure all voices are heard.
- Help participants avoid “cross talk” during check-in and initial topic discussion.
- Ensure observance of the group’s covenant.
- Take responsibility for integrating any new members.
- Ensure we make time for the group to say good-bye to members who leave.

Outside of Meeting Times

- Help the group be a circle of caring and concern.
- Connect with participants outside the monthly Circle, including calling members who miss a meeting without advance notice.
- Lead and co-facilitators consult between meetings to confirm who will be taking what responsibilities and to consider any challenges the Circle may be experiencing.
- If there are difficulties in the Circle, discuss the issues with your co-facilitator and contact Rev. Kevin for help as needed.

Record Keeping

- Keep a roster of Circle participants and their contact information
- Share each monthly packet with participants at least three weeks before the next Circle.
- Make room reservations for Circle meetings, if needed.
- Ensure that the co-facilitator is prepared to facilitate if the lead cannot attend.
- If a group member drops out, contact Jo Waters or Rev. Kevin.

Frequently Asked Questions

How will I get the monthly reading packets and spiritual exercises?

Your facilitator will make sure you receive the packet at least three weeks prior to each Circle. Most folks will receive it by email. If you need a hard copy, please let your facilitator know.

What if I must miss one of my group's meetings?

Let your facilitator know as soon as possible. S/he and the rest of the Circle will be concerned if you just don't show up.

What happens if a meeting needs to be cancelled? For instance, if a snowstorm is coming.

If there is any question, your facilitator will always confirm whether the Circle is on or off at least a couple hours before the group is scheduled to meet. Make sure your facilitator always has your current contact information and knows how best to reach you (cell, text, email, etc.)

Where does my Circle meet?

The first meetings of each brand new Circle will likely be at held at UUCM. The ideal meeting place for a Circle offers privacy and room to form a circle (with an empty chair) without a table. Because that kind of space is hard to find at UUCM, after the first meeting, any Circle may decide to meet off-site.

What if our group changes its meeting time – be it for one time or changing the meeting date permanently?

The normal pattern for once-a-month groups is to meet the same week each month (e.g., the first Monday). While flexibility may be needed in such a schedule, around holidays or other special events, there is a real virtue and legitimate expectation in predictable scheduling. The group should be reluctant to reschedule if the result is that any member wouldn't be able to attend because of a conflict with the proposed reschedule. Also, keep in mind that when rescheduling is proposed and participants at the meeting are generally supporting it, some individuals may be feeling pressured to acquiesce.

What about serving coffee? Snacks?

Providing refreshments is discouraged, as eating can subtly shift the focus away from our primary intention of creating formative space for individuals.

What if someone decides to drop out of the Circle?

That person will be asked to come for one final meeting with the group. This will give both the person who is leaving and the other members of the Circle an opportunity to say good-bye to each other.

Does my Circle meet through the summer months?

Our UUCM Soul Matters Circle cycle is anticipated to run September through June, though individual Circles may choose to continue to meet in July and August.