

Soul Matters

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles.
- Rufus Jones

Through others we become ourselves.
— Lev S. Vygotsky

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WELCOME

Welcome to Soul Matters and the adventure of small groups! This guide is a roadmap to the journey ahead. It covers how Soul Matters small groups work, but it also steps back and talks about the gifts you will receive, and give. Small groups are not just about exchanging ideas; they are most fundamentally a means of offering sacred space to each other. This sacred “gift-giving” sits at the center of this guide. It will prepare you to participate effectively, but more importantly, it is here to welcome you as gift to others.

We begin by sharing the deeper purpose of Soul Matters groups. While much of this guide covers the “how” of small groups, we also want you grounded in the deeper “why.” Groups succeed when everyone is clear about the ground rules; they thrive when members are clear about the deeper transformation small groups offer.

We then talk about how Soul Matters groups differ from other small group models. The Soul Matters process helps us experience the themes not just talk about them. Its content challenges our minds, but is even more interested helping us connect our faith to our daily living.

After that, we get into the nuts and bolts, from creating a group covenant, to participating in meetings, to the work we do before we arrive.

Finally, we introduce you to the inspiring voices of those who have been on the journey. We want you to be well-prepared and well-nourished. So we close out the guide with readings and quotes that remind us why small groups matter so much. Think of them as additional companions for the journey ahead.

Let that journey begin!



Facilitation thrives when leaders are clear about the deeper transformation small groups offer.

PURPOSE

WHY JOIN A SOUL MATTERS GROUP?

Before we talk about how to participate in a Soul Matters group, let's be clear about why they matter. Groups succeed when everyone understands the ground rules; they thrive when members embrace the deeper transformation small groups offer.

Simply put, Soul Matters groups offer the gift of spiritual connection. Around us swirls a shallow, frantic and materialistic culture that regularly leaves us cut off from our deepest selves, life's gifts and needs greater than our own. Many of us come to church hungry to mend these sacred connections that get frayed and torn. Soul Matters exists to support this journey of reconnection to life, others and our selves.

We do that by listening. Fundamentally, that's what Soul Matters is: an invitation to listen more deeply and intentionally, in three distinct ways:

First, we listen to each other. It's a gift not often offered in our culture. Most of the time, we are "talked at" rather than listened to. We are bombarded with information and demands that drown out our own voice. Being listened to by trusted companions helps us hear our own voice again. And more than that: It gives us our story back. Theologian, Rebecca Parker, puts it this way:

"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 our truth be told."

Second, we listen to our lives. This is not easy to do. Directly or indirectly, we are taught to see life as a challenge not a companion. The goal is to conquer it, not listen to it. Soul Matters invites us to take another look and dance with life in a new way. Through spiritual practices and questions focused on our daily living, we engage the world not as an obstacle course to get through, but as a host of holy voices calling us to greater loving and living. Christian novelist, Fredrick Buechner beautifully captures this sacred way of engaging the world:

"You never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it.... You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not [the Sacred] is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where you should go next."

Finally, we listen to our deepest selves. Introspection is most often understood as solitary work, but small group practice teaches us that going inward is largely a gift given



We come hungry to mend the sacred connections that get frayed and torn.

to us by others. Ironically, we hear that “still, small voice inside” best when the voices of friends speak and offer their presence in a disciplined way. Quaker teacher Parker Palmer explains:

“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.”

Together, these three sacred practices of listening – to each other, the world and our deepest selves – add up to a more intentional and authentic life. It’s a journey back to connection, and ultimately a journey back home. Again, we turn to Parker Palmer. Here’s how he describes the path:

“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. And some are using the blizzard as cover while cynically exploiting its chaos for private gain...

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 can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the whiteout. We may forget, or deny, that its guidance is close at hand. And yet we are still in the soul’s backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings.” (From A Hidden Wholeness)

Realizing we are in the soul’s backyard.

Grasping again the rope that leads us back home.

This, ultimately, is why one joins a Soul Matters small group. Yes, you will encounter meaningful discussions and a stimulating exchange of ideas. Yes, you will discover new friends. But in the end, this is about recovering wholeness and the journey back home.



We are always in the soul’s backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings.

APPROACH

WHAT MAKES SOUL MATTERS DIFFERENT?

We've already begun to answer this question. Soul Matters' distinguishing characteristic is a focus on deep listening that helps us heal spiritual disconnection. But the way Soul Matters goes about that is also unique. Here's how:

Soul Matters invites us to listen to each other deeply and with discipline.

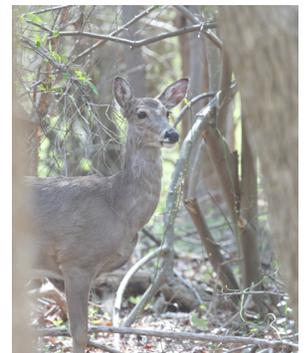
There is nothing passive about deep listening. It requires effort and intentionality. Soul Matters invites group members to practice three distinct disciplines of deep listening during their meeting time, captured simply in this three-part mantra:

- Hold still – the practice of offering space
- Hold at bay – the practice of offering presence
- Hold out and hold up – the practice of offering gratitude and noting meaningful connections

“Hold still” is about offering each other the gift of space. It is what Rebecca Parker calls “a listening that holds still long enough to let others’ truths be told.” In practice, this means responding to people’s sharing with silence rather than words. In our groups, each member takes a turn sharing before any group discussion or reactions occur. We “hold” each other’s sharing, rather than react to it with comments or questions. Responding to each other with silence can feel awkward, but makes room for the one speaking to hear themselves. It’s about offering a spaciousness that allows one’s sharing to wander in safety and new insights to emerge. Parker Palmer refers to this as the practice of “honoring the shy soul”:

“The soul is shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out... A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly “in the woods” with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up.”

“Hold at bay” is about offering presence rather than advice. It involves keeping our often unhelpful reactions in check. It’s natural to analyze and assess when listening. It’s understandable that we want to offer advice and try to help people solve the problems they are struggling with. It’s also not what we need. So we hold our unhelpful responses at bay by following the rule of “No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.” Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins explain our discipline of “holding at bay” this way:



A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly “in the woods” with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up.

“It’s hard work to listen with an open heart rather than an analyzing mind. It requires putting aside judgment, categorization, and evaluation and instead just hearing the story that is told, and the feelings behind it... Even the most experienced listeners repeatedly will slip into judging and analyzing. When you realize that this has happened, gently set aside your thinking for later and open your heart. Buddhist meditators, who face the same problem, speak of treating the mind like a beloved but sometimes inappropriate child who wants to show off to guests. ‘Not now, sweetie,’ says the kind parent. ‘You go and play and we will join you in a bit.’ Similarly, when we are listening and notice that we are commenting to ourselves about what is being said, we can tell our minds, ‘This is not the time for analysis. I just need to hear this story.’... In time, we discover that to be listened to is a way of being loved, and that listening is a way of being loving.” (Heart to Heart)

“Hold out and hold up” is about what we say when do talk and reaction to each other’s sharing. After a round of sitting in silence and listening to each group member share, the group then opens itself to a time of sharing reactions. But instead of responding to each other with “fixing, advising or saving,” we hold out gratitude for one thing that struck us in particular as we listened and hold up how it connected to our lives and helped us clarify something about our own situation. This requires a different kind of listening from the start. Instead of analyzing or judging what people are saying, we listen for sharing that connects with us personally and feels like a personal gift. In other words, we don’t just “sit quietly” while others are talking; we actively listen for those precious moments when another’s story or experience takes us more deeply into our own.

Soul Matters is an invitation to experience the themes, not just analyze them.

Spiritual analysis without spiritual practice leaves us unchanged. This is why we make spiritual exercises a central part of each monthly packet. These spiritual practices take us beyond the question of “What do you think?” and invite us into the deeper one of “Where are you willing to let your faith take you?”

For instance, when we wrestled with the concept of grace, we didn’t just share what theologians had to say about it. The packet also challenged group members to find a way to bring grace (a gift one doesn’t expect, earn or even deserve) into another person’s life. The goal was to “be grace” not just talk about it. Another example is how we handled the theme of prayer. The packets included theories and perspectives on prayer, but they also invited members to find a new way to pray (or even try prayer for the first time!).

Multiple spiritual practices are suggested each month. This allows people to pick the one that meets them where they are. Some exercises are intense; others are playful. Some involve a lot of time and commitment; others can be done in one sitting. The experiences are diverse as well. Some members report having “the most moving experience of my life.” Others come in and say “I’m not sure that worked for me, but it did make me realize...” No matter what, the experience of “doing” opens us up in a way that just can’t be accomplished through sitting and thinking.

The goal is to get us out of our heads and into our lives. This is not to say we leave thinking behind. Instead, the aim of the spiritual exercises is to challenge our tendency to use “objective analysis” as an escape. As Parker Palmer puts it,

“Instead of telling our valuable stories, we seek safety in abstractions, speaking to each other about our opinions, ideas, and beliefs rather than about what is really going on in our lives. Academic culture blesses this practice by insisting that the more abstract our speech, the more likely we are to touch the universal truths that unite us. But what happens is exactly the reverse: as our discourse becomes more abstract, the less connected we feel. There is less sense of community among intellectuals than in the most ‘primitive’ society of storytellers.” (A Hidden Wholeness)

By pushing us to engage and talk about “what is really going on in our lives,” our spiritual exercises shake things up. A holy crack takes root in our entrenched narratives. Suddenly we find ourselves challenged not just to think differently but to live differently.

Soul Matters offers questions that walk with you rather than quiz you.

Soul Matters also takes a unique approach to discussion questions. In traditional small groups, questions are an opportunity for the group to think together. Soul Matters treats them as tools for individual exploration. Instead of having small groups to go through a list of questions and discuss them one by one, Soul Matters participants are asked to read all the questions ahead of time and find the one question that “hooks them” — the one that speaks to and challenges them personally. Participants then live with -- or “walk with” -- that question for a couple weeks leading up to the group, coming to their meeting, not with an answer to each of the questions on the list, but with a story about how this one particular question led them to a new and personal insight. This technique leads us away from abstraction and intellectualizing and instead invites us into a deeper focus on daily living.

It also invites us to listen to our own inner voice. By asking us to pick which question is “theirs,” the packets put us in the mindset of spiritual discernment. The packet doesn’t so much ask us questions as it invites us to figure out which question our deepest self is asking us. In this way, our approach to questions doesn’t just foster good conversation; it also introduces people to spiritual practice.



A holy crack takes root in our entrenched narratives. Suddenly we find ourselves challenged not just to think differently but to live differently.

Soul Matters offers you conversation partners throughout the entire month

Our monthly group conversations are a gift, but we know that spiritual development is not a once-a-month thing. Honoring this, Soul Matters is designed to give participants the experience of a month-long conversation with multiple conversation partners. The packets contain extensive recommended readings, poetry, quotes and multimedia on the theme. We also maintain a Facebook inspiration page with daily posts, which functions as a kind of online devotional. These two resources keep small group members engaged with numerous voices throughout the entire month.

Engaging these voices is another way we invite participants to “listen to life.” As Unitarian Universalists, we honor the way the holy speaks through sacred texts, but we also see the world itself as a holy text. Additionally, our belief in ongoing revelation calls us to listen to new & current voices. For us, this means taking the voices of bloggers, musicians and “ordinary people” as seriously as those of philosophers, theologians and academics. Treating blogs, YouTube videos, movies and music videos as “sacred texts” is not just an attempt to “be current.” It is most deeply an effort to remind us that the voice of the Holy is all around us, even in the most unlikely of places. The goal is to help us remain always open and always listening!

Soul Matters is a reminder that Unitarian Universalism is a distinctive community of faith, not a religion of “anything goes.”

Our monthly themes are not just interesting topics. Rather they focus us on a spiritual value that our UU faith has historically honored and calls all of us to embody in our lives. In other words, at each meeting, we are reminded that our faith promotes a preferred way for us to be in the world. This is why each monthly theme is framed with the question: “What does it mean to be a people of _____?” It is our way of remembering that our faith asks something specific of us.

This frame also honors the fact that we need each other to become who we most deeply want to be. We talk about being a people of faith, not just a person of faith because, for us, spirituality is not a solo journey. It is something that emerges in the context of covenanted community. We hold each other accountable. We offer each other the gift of deep listening. We share our various perspectives so all of us can see the greater whole. Through this we grow. Through others, we become ourselves.

Soul Matters is part of a greater whole.

Soul Matters is not a stand-alone ministry. It is designed as a companion program to a congregation's worship experience. Soul Matters small groups are an opportunity to explore the congregation's monthly worship themes in more depth. This creates an entirely different experience for small group members and the whole church. In this model (often called "theme-based church"), one's small group experience isn't just a journey in and of itself; it is part of a larger church-wide journey that the whole congregation is taking together each month. In other words, your Soul Matters group connects you to the greater whole.



Soul Matters groups connect us to the greater whole. It doesn't just transform individuals; it also transforms coffee hour!

PROCESS

HOW DO MEETINGS WORK?

So how are meetings structured and groups kept on track? Here's the meeting format we recommend as well as a suggested group covenant.

Meeting Format & Process

Prior to the Meeting

- Members make time to engage the monthly packets at least 1-2 weeks prior to each meeting.
- Members select and complete one of the spiritual exercises.
- Members make time to reflect on the list of questions and pick the one that speaks most directly to them. They then “live with” that question for a week or two. Some make the question a part of their meditative practice. Others print it out and pin it somewhere they can see it each day. Some just pull it into awareness in a more informal way.
- Members set aside time to look over the recommended resources (“Companion Pieces”) and follow the Soul Matters facebook page. This extra reading and facebook engagement is optional but deepens the experience. It is part of the practice of “listening to life.”

At the Meeting

Meetings are usually 2 hours long and follow this format:

Centering

The facilitator or a group member offers a chalice lighting or centering words. Sometimes these are a favorite quote, poem or video from the recommended resource section of the packet. Other times, a group member offers a prayer or leads the group in a guided meditation. The point is to provide a moment of pause so members can shift into the slower mode of receptivity and bring themselves into the present moment.

Brief Check-In – around 15-20 minutes

Members briefly participate in a focused check-in. The goal is to avoid involved reports about all that has happened since the group last met. Instead of asking, “How is everyone doing?,” groups focus their sharing with a more specific spiritually-oriented invitation, such as “Let’s now briefly share one thing that is currently pulling at or draining your spirit and one thing that is feeding, filling or lifting up your spirit.” Each member takes just a couple minutes to share. The group listens quietly as each person shares rather than engaging in cross-talk.



Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings.

Spiritual Exercises – around 40 minutes

Members share their experience of doing the spiritual exercise, addressing such questions as: What led to you picking the exercise you did? 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?

Sharing follows the practice of deep listening. Instead of interrupting each other with questions or commentary, members listen quietly as each one takes a turn sharing. After everyone has had a chance to share and receive the gift of deep listening, the facilitator opens the floor and invites members into a time of reflective conversation. The group reminds itself about the "hold at bay" rule: "No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight." Instead, members "hold out gratitude and hold up connections" by sharing gratitude for a comment or two that particularly spoke to them and then talking about how that comment of others connected to or helped clarify something in their own lives. Facilitators will often introduce this time of group discussion by asking, "How did others' sharing help you see something new about your own story or work?" or "When did you find yourself feeling particularly grateful as you listened?"

Engaging the Questions – around 40 minutes

Members take turns listening quietly as each one shares the question from the list they picked, why it spoke to them and where reflecting on it led them. After everyone has had a chance to share, the facilitator opens the floor and invites members to lift up gratitudes and/or comment on the connections they saw between their own experience and what others shared.

Check-Out – around 10 minutes

Meetings end by each member briefly sharing a statement of gratitude. Facilitators ask participants to think about all that was shared and experienced during the meeting and then lift up one comment or experience for which they are particularly grateful.

Closing Words

The meeting ends by extinguishing the chalice and sharing a closing reading, prayer or blessing.



Forming a covenant isn't just about good group process, it is a core Unitarian Universalist practice. It is the means by which we are held together in community.

Group Covenant

A covenant is a list of the ways we agree to be together as a group. It includes the promises, practices and behaviors that guide our time together. The idea of covenant is central to Unitarian Universalism. We are 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 about good group process, 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 promise to help the group revisit and re-affirm the covenant at least once a year.

The below covenant captures the core promises and practices of the Soul Matters approach. Groups can use it as is, but it is often helpful for groups to add additional commitments or put the commitments into their own words.

Template

Before our meetings, we agree to:

- Make meetings a priority, including being on time
- **Contact the facilitator(s) ahead of time if we are unable to attend**
- Engage the packet ahead of time: reading the material, reflecting on the questions and doing one of the spiritual exercises

During our meetings, we agree to:

- Practice deep listening, offering each other time to share without interruption. (“Hold still & offer space”)
- Honor the rule of “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight!” during times of discussion and cross-talk. (“Hold advice at bay and offer presence”)
- Monitor the length and frequency of our own participation so all members have opportunities to speak.
- **Speak for ourselves and offer reactions rooted in gratitude and connected to our own experience (“Hold out and hold up”)**
- **Make time to say good bye when a member decides to leave the group.**
- **Periodically revisit, adapt and re-affirm this covenant as a group, especially when new members join the group**

After our meetings, we agree to:

- Follow up with members who miss a meeting without notice to make sure they are okay.
- Respect the privacy of group members by keeping personal sharing confidential
- Keep each other in our prayers and thoughts, reaching out to each other in tangible ways to ensure that we are a caring community for one another
- Keep a look out for other church members who might benefit from and fit with our group, recognizing that inviting is the job of us all and a way to express our gratitude for the gifts the group has given us. We will connect potential new members

with our group facilitator so they can go over the New Participant Packet to make sure the potential new member is comfortable with and agrees to our process and practices.

As facilitator, I agree to:

- Start and end meetings on time
- Make sure all voices are heard
- Remind the group about our covenant, process and practices
- Help the group be a circle of caring and concern
- Recruit another group member to facilitate if I cannot attend
- Ensure that the group periodically revisits and re-affirms this covenant
- Include the group in decisions about new members joining
- 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 and practices
- Ensure we make time for the group to say good-bye to members who leave

Template – abbreviated version

We agree to:

- Make meetings a priority
- Engage the packet in advance
- Practice deep listening (“Hold still & offer space”)
- No fixing or advising (“Hold advice at bay and offer presence”)
- Monitor our participation
- Speak with gratitude and look for connections to our experience (“Hold out gratitude and hold up connections”)
- Make time to say good bye
- Remember and re-affirm our covenant
- Follow up with absent members
- Honor confidentiality
- Keep each other in our hearts & reach out
- Invite others and share the gift of small groups with others

As facilitator, I agree to:

- Start and end meetings on time
- Invite everyone’s voice
- Remind the group about our process and practices
- Foster a circle of caring and concern
- Recruit facilitation if I cannot attend
- Ensure re-affirmation of our covenant
- Include the group in decisions about new members joining
- Welcome new members with intentionality
- Make time for good-byes when members leave

GOING DEEPER

WHAT HAVE OTHERS EXPERIENCED AND LEARNED ALONG THE WAY?

Joining a Soul Matters small group connects you to a wider circle of travelers. There are many who have walked and laid this path before us. In this final section, we bring you into conversation with those fellow companions. The following readings, quotes and videos share what others have learned along the way. They also offer inspiration for the journey. We want you to be well-prepared and well-nourished. May these voices help make that happen.

Listening to Each Other and Offering the Gift of Presence

I took comfort and strength from those few people who neither fled from me nor tried to save me but were simply present to me. Their willingness to be present revealed their faith that I had the inner resources to make this treacherous trek -- quietly bolstering my faltering faith.

- Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

Instead of telling our valuable stories, we seek safety in abstractions, speaking to each other about our opinions, ideas, and beliefs rather than about our lives. Academic culture blesses this practice by insisting that the more abstract our speech, the more likely we are to touch the universal truths that unite us. But what happens is exactly the reverse: as our discourse becomes more abstract, the less connected we feel. There is less sense of community among intellectuals than in the most 'primitive' society of storytellers.

- Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept... Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you.

- Henry Nouwen

It's not about what you say. It's about creating a space where every person can hear, discover and listen to their own voice.

- Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*



It's not about what you say. It's about creating a space where every person can hear, discover and listen to their own voice.

What does it mean to listen to a voice before it is spoken? It means making space for the other, being aware of the other, paying attention to the other, honoring the other. It means not rushing to fill their silences with fearful speech of our own and not trying to coerce them into saying the things that we want to hear. It means entering empathetically into their world so that he or she perceives you as someone who has the promise of being able to hear another person's truth.

- Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

Deep listening is the kind of listening that can help relieve the suffering of another person. You can call it compassionate listening. You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her to empty his heart. Even if he says things that are full of wrong perceptions, full of bitterness, you are still capable of listening with compassion. Because you know that listening like that, you give the person a chance to suffer less. If you want to help him to correct his perception, you wait for another time. For now, you don't interrupt. You don't argue. If you do, he loses his chance. You just listen with compassion and help him to suffer less. One hour like that can bring compassion and healing.

- Thich Nhat Hanh

Listening is not passive. It's hard work to listen with an open heart rather than an analyzing mind. It requires putting aside judgment, categorization, and evaluation and instead just hearing the story that is told, and the feelings behind it. Some people say they can feel themselves shift from their mind to hearts when they are listening. Some describe deep listening as a sacred experience.

It is the mind's nature to think, and so even the most experienced listeners repeatedly will slip into judging and analyzing. When you realize that this has happened, gently set aside your thinking for later and open your heart. Buddhist meditators, who face the same problem, speak of treating the mind like a beloved but sometimes inappropriate child who wants to show off to guests. 'Not now, sweetie,' says the kind parent. 'You go and play and we will join you in a bit.' Similarly, when we are listening and notice that we are commenting to ourselves about what is being said, we can tell our minds, 'This is not the time for analysis. I just need to hear this story.'

Most people need a few experiences of simply being listened to before they can really believe that just listening is enough. In time, we discover that to be listened to is a way of being loved, and that listening is a way of being loving.

- Christine Robinson & Alicia Hawkins, *Heart to Heart*

Receiving the Gift of Deep Listening: Unleashing the Heart's Capacity (video)

<http://www.couragerenewal.org/stories/hearts-capacity/>

My Misgivings About Advice (article) - Parker Palmer

<http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=2188>

Just Listen (reflection) - Rachel Naomi Remen

<http://www.livinglifefully.com/flo/flobejustlisten.htm>

Councils (poem) - Marge Piercy

<https://sarahwbartlett.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/councils-marge-piercy.pdf>

The first duty of love is to listen. - Paul Tillich

Listening is the oldest and perhaps the most powerful tool of healing. It is often through the quality of our listening and not the wisdom of our words that we are able to effect the most profound changes in the people around us. When we listen, we offer with our



The first duty of love is to listen.

attention an opportunity for wholeness. Our listening creates sanctuary for the homeless parts within the other person. That which has been denied, unloved, devalued by themselves and others. That which is hidden. In this culture the soul and the heart too often go homeless. Listening creates a holy silence. When you listen generously to people, they can hear the truth in themselves, often for the first time. And in the silence of listening, you can know yourself in everyone. Eventually you may be able to hear, in everyone and beyond everyone, the unseen singing softly to itself and to you.

- Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings*

When someone deeply listens to you
it is like holding out a dented cup
you've had since childhood
and watching it fill up with
cold, fresh water.

When it balances on top of the brim,
you are understood.

When it overflows and touches your skin,
you are loved. - John Fox

When someone deeply listens to you,
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote
your first poem
begins to glow in your mind's eye.
It is as if gold has been discovered!

- John Fox

When someone deeply listens to you,
your barefeet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

- John Fox

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving me advice, you have not done what I asked. When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings. When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problems, you have failed me, strange as that may seem. Listen! All I asked was that you listen, not talk or do. . . just hear me. And I can do for myself. I'm not helpless. Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless. When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy. But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I can quit trying to convince you and can get about this business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling. And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I don't need advice. Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what's behind them. Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes, for some people. . . because God is mute and doesn't give advice or try to fix things. God just listens and lets you work it out for yourself.

- unattributed



*When I ask you to listen to me
and you start giving me advice,
then...*

Listening to Your Life

There is no event so commonplace but that [the Holy] is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize [it] or not recognize [it], but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly... Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

- Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then*

Literature, painting, music — the most basic lesson that all art teaches us is to stop, look, and listen to life on this planet, including our own lives, as a vastly richer, deeper, more mysterious business than most of the time it ever occurs to us to suspect as we bumble along from day to day on automatic pilot... Pay attention to the frog. Pay attention to the west wind. Pay attention to the boy on the raft, the lady in the tower, the old man on the train. In sum, pay attention to the world and all that dwells therein and thereby learn at last to pay attention to yourself and all that dwells therein. . .

- Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in The ABC's of Faith*

Moments of hearing for the first time; you never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where you should go next.

- Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words*

God is right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives... trying to get messages through our blindness as we move around down here knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world. [Faith is] the persistent presentiment that Something is trying to get through in the midst of the muddle of our day-to-day lives.

- Dale Brown

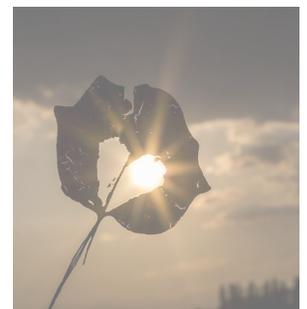
There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

The Way It Is, By William Stafford

Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations (book)

by Frederick Buechner

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B000VYX9BC/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?encoding=UTF8&btkr=1>



Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. Because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

Thin Places: Seeking the Courage to Live in a Divided World (book)

by Sally Z. Hare

<http://www.couragerenewal.org/thin-places/>

We begin our lives listening to the many sounds surrounding us in the womb. When we are dying, the last faculty to shut down is usually hearing. In between, there is so much to see that we seldom take the time to cultivate the art of listening. Listening uses other practices: attention, being present, openness. It is holy work, involving in the inventive phrase of W.A. Mathieu, a Sufi musician, “making an altar out of our ears.”

- Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

Listening to the World

An On Being interview with Mary Oliver

<https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world/>

Ancestors' Breaths - Sweet Honey In The Rock

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oE4Qatypjs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSxjSherzaQ>

Listening to Your Deeper Self

We all have an inner teacher whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution, or leader.

- Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

Like a wild animal, the soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. I learned about these qualities during my bouts with depression. In that deadly darkness, the faculties I had always depended on collapsed. My intellect was useless; my emotions were dead; my will was impotent; my ego was shattered. But from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness, I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive even when the rest of me wanted to die. That something was my tough and tenacious soul.

Yet despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of an eye - but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself.

Unfortunately, community in our culture too often means a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away. In spaces ranging from congregations to classrooms, we preach and teach, assert and argue, claim and proclaim, admonish and advise, and generally behave in ways that drive everything original and wild into hiding. Under these conditions, the intellect, emotions, will and ego may emerge, but not the soul: we scare off all the soulful things, like respectful relationships, goodwill, and hope.



Our purpose is not to teach anyone anything but to give the inner teacher a chance to teach us.

A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly “in the woods” with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up... In such a space, we are freed to hear our own truth, touch what brings us joy, become self critical about our faults, and take risky steps toward change - knowing that we will be accepted no matter what the outcome.

- Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

If we want to support each other’s inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person’s soul, there is another truth we must remember: the soul is like a wild animal -- tough, resilient, and yet shy. When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding. But if we are willing to sit quietly and wait for a while, the soul may show itself.

- Parker Palmer

You could’ve come like a mighty storm
With all the strength of a hurricane
You could’ve come like a forest fire
With the power of Heaven in Your flame

But You came like a winter snow
Quiet and soft and slow
Falling from the sky in the night
To the earth below

No, Your voice wasn’t in a bush burning
No, Your voice wasn’t in a rushing wind
It was still, it was small, it was hidden
Quiet and soft and slow

-Audrey Assad

Put to song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pi25lohx7Kw&index=43&list=PL3460E9EA50474423>

Inside everyone is a great shout of joy waiting to be born. Even with the summer so far off I feel it grown in me now and ready to arrive in the world. All those years listening to those who had nothing to say. All those years forgetting how everything has its own voice to make itself heard. All those years forgetting how easily you can belong to everything simply by listening.

- David Whyte

The True Self and the Thread of the Divine (reflection)

- Richard Rohr

<https://cac.org/sacred-breathing-all-of-it-is-2017-08-11/>

Immortal Diamond (book) - Richard Rohr

http://store.cac.org/Immortal-Diamond_p_23.html

“In this new book, Rohr likens the True Self to a diamond, buried deep within us, formed under the intense pressure of our lives, that must be searched for, uncovered, separated from all the debris of ego that surrounds it. In a sense the True Self must, like Jesus, be resurrected, and that process is not resuscitation but transformation...”

Parker Palmer on the Soul (video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJupHyl-4qQ>

Why Circles of Trust & Listening Matter

Why Circles of Trust and Safe Space Matter (video) with Parker Palmer

<http://www.couragerenewal.org/approach/>

Healing Community: Small group ministry creates a sacred time where the stories of our lives are heard, by Thandeka

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/small-group-ministry-creates-sacred-time>

Getting By with a Little Help From My...Circles of Trust

By Marcia Eames-Sheavly

<http://www.couragerenewal.org/circles-trust/>

Why mindful meetings?

by Kelly Dignan

Mindful meetings are Unitarian Universalist covenantal theology in practice. What it means to be a covenantal religion is that we put our faith in relationship. We trust that together we can explore the deeper meanings and purposes that life holds for us. We trust that we are better together when we reach out in compassion to alleviate suffering. Covenant is the theological expression of what we know through systems theory – that it matters what we do – not just to ourselves, but to the whole system, the interdependent web of which we are a part.

Our theology is bound by the belief that together, we can learn to walk in the ways of love. This is a theology we've been following since the Cambridge Platform of 1648. In this covenantal theology, we acknowledge that we need each other. Our commitment to relationship calls us out of our cultural individualism - we acknowledge that our interdependence is sacred. Our commitment to relationship also calls us to love our diversity - we acknowledge that every being is sacred and worthy.

In order to live our theology of covenantal relationship, we need practices. The mindful meeting practice grounds the work of our religious communities in the core values of our faith tradition. Covenant calls us to live in integrity with ourselves, our community, and the wider world. The work we do in service includes the work we do with each other.

Mindful meeting practices are intentional and experiential. In these ways, they can differ quite dramatically from meeting practices with a narrower scope, such as meetings held only to accomplish particular business. In our faith tradition, our meetings are times in which we gather to do the work of living out our mission and covenant in the world.

There are three aspects of any mindful meeting practice, and each aspect addresses a different connection and question:

- **Inner connection – Centering: how am I dwelling in myself?**
- **Group connection – Grounding in compassion: how are we together today?**
- **World connection – Attuning: what is the world calling forth from us?**



*Your voice was still, it was small,
it was hidden. Quiet and soft and
slow.*

The mindful meeting process walks the group through all three of these connections, so that the 'work' of the group is grounded in the integrity of covenant, acknowledging and honoring our radical interdependence. There are many formats a mindful meeting may take, but whatever format a mindful meeting uses, these three key aspects of connection, whether spoken or unspoken, are present.

Learning Together About Doing Small Groups Well

Parker Palmer - Rules for Inner Work in Community (video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EbyAgvY250>

Characteristics of a Circle of Trust -Parker J. Palmer (video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oRPU2M45Y4>

Quaker Guide: Hearing Your Inner Voice and When to Speak

https://scontent-ort2-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/20727960_1533700153318047_2029035735894794030_n.jpg?oh=0c85376c4cd165a8c9a87e81bb71ba27&oe=59F1E855

Nine Guidelines for Listening to Others - UUA

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/commitment/workshop3/111279.shtml>

Simple science shows us that no two things can take up the same space at the same time. So it is with listening. You cannot think and listen; read and listen; day dream and listen; write and listen; agree, disagree, argue, interpret, mind read, rehearse, plot, plan, placate, or even listen and listen. Listening requires our full and focused attention on the other person.

- John Milton Fogg

Soul Matters Inspiration

Soul Matters Facebook Inspiration Page

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