

# Starting Point:

*An Introduction to the Unitarian Universalist Journey*

Copyright Rev. Scott Tayler, First Unitarian Church of Rochester



## ***The Blizzard of the World***

*From, A Hidden Wholeness, by Parker Palmer*

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 whiteout, yes, without a doubt. Yet, by grace and gifts, through both mysterious blessings and 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.

## **Group Description:**

How can Unitarian Universalism make a difference in your life?  
How does Unitarian Universalism differ from other approaches to  
the spiritual life? Where does the UU journey begin? Where does it  
take you? Are you ready for this?!

These are the questions we address in this course specially  
designed for those new to Unitarian Universalism and 1st Unitarian  
(or long-timers interested in reminding themselves why they fell in  
love with Unitarian Universalism in the first place). This class not  
only helps you decide if Unitarian Universalism is right for you; it  
also helps you find your place at First Unitarian and get connected  
to other church members.

But be prepared--this is not your typical lecture series about the  
history and beliefs of Unitarian Universalism. It's about what you  
want your life to be!

## **Meeting Schedule:**

Four Thursday Evenings 6:30 to 8:30 pm

*January 13, 20, 27 and February 3*

Four Thursday Afternoons 12:00 to 2:00 pm

*January 27, February 3, 10 and 24*

# **SESSION ONE:**

## ***Your Journey:***

### **Sharing Our Stories and “Working” Roadmaps**

#### **Overview:**

We introduce the “game plan” for our four weeks together. The philosophy of seeing Unitarian Universalism “as a journey” will guide us, starting in this session with each of us sharing our own religious journey to this point. We will get to know each other better but also explore the diversity among us and how this diversity is considered one of the cornerstones of UU spirituality.

#### **Pre-Reading/Listening:**

- ◆ First Unitarian Members’ “This I Believe” statements:  
<http://www.rochesterunitarian.org/thisibelieve.html>
- ◆ This I Believe; Life Now! Radio Show:  
<<http://www.lifenowradio.org/podcast/this-i-believe/> (*This radio show features some of the statements in the written packet, with the authors reflecting on the process of writing their statements.*)

*(If you don’t have access to a computer, you can request typed copies of the readings & CD versions of the audio files from Scott)*

#### **Pre-Work:**

- ◆ Do the “Belief Spectrum” exercise in preparation for sharing with larger group in meeting. (*Handout in back of this packet*)
- ◆ Do the “Complete the Sentence” exercise in preparation for sharing with the larger group. (*Handout in back of this packet*)
- ◆ As you read and listen to the *This I Believe Statements*, think about which one you resonate with most. And while it is not an assignment, those who find themselves inspired are welcome to try to write a *This I Believe Statement* of your own!

#### **Questions to Think About Ahead of Time:**

- ◆ What from your religious past do you most treasure? What are you bringing with you from that part of your journey?
- ◆ What do you most regret or disagree with from your religious past? Is it something you continue to struggle with and react against? Would you say you were “hurt” by your religious past? Misled? Bored?

## **SESSION TWO:**

# ***First Unitarian's Journey:***

### **A Courageous History that Challenges Us Still**

#### **Overview:**

We look at First Unitarian's history, including the history of Unitarian Universalism out of which First Unitarian emerged. And it won't be boring! Get ready for an *interactive* engagement of our theological past.

#### **Pre-Reading:**

- ◆ Unitarian Universalist Origins: <http://archive.uua.org/info/origins.html>
- ◆ UU History in 2,000 Words: <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2008/09/rzepka.html>
- ◆ UUA Principles & Purposes: <http://www.uua.org/aboutuua/principles.html>
- ◆ First Unitarian History: [http://rochesterunitarian.org/history\\_firstunitarian.html](http://rochesterunitarian.org/history_firstunitarian.html)
- ◆ Standing on the Shoulders of Giants, sermon by Associate Minister Jen Crow (May 25, 2008) : <http://www.rochesterunitarian.org/Sermons.html> (*You will need to scroll down to May 25. An audio version of the sermon is there as well.*)

#### **Pre-Work:**

- ◆ Explore the church's webpage: <http://rochesterunitarian.org/index.html>

#### **Questions to Think About Ahead of Time:**

- ◆ What parts of Unitarian Universalist history have special meaning for you? What story echoes or clarifies your own?
- ◆ What parts don't fit your personal journey and beliefs? What parts of UU history and belief cause you worry?
- ◆ Many of our religious forbearers were willing to die for their beliefs. How do you personally make sense of this idea of "being willing to die for what you believe"? One way might be to ask yourself "What am I willing to lose in order to stand up for what I believe?"

# **SESSION THREE:**

## ***Our Journey Together:***

### **The First Two "Lifelines" of the First Unitarian Journey**

#### **Overview:**

We look at the first two of the three "lifelines" of First Unitarian:

- ◆ Listening to and re-connecting to your "deepest self," and
- ◆ Opening yourself to life's gifts (and resources" greater than your own).

Whereas the third lifeline of "serving needs greater than our own" asks "what are you willing to give?" these first two "actions" of the spiritual journey invite us to notice what we've been given. The "instructions" on these legs of the journey might be summed up this way: "Listen and look around!" We'll not just talk about this, but do little of it together.

#### **Pre-Reading/Listening:**

- ◆ For "Listening and Re-connecting to your "deepest self"/"inner voice":
  - "Listen to Your Life" Selections (*Handout in the back of this packet*)
  - "In Dark Woods" Sermon by Rev. Scott Tayler (*Handout in the back of this packet*)
- ◆ For "Opening to life's gifts":
  - Trusting the Wind; Sermon by Rev. Scott Tayler (Jan. 29, 2006)  
<http://www.rochesterunitarian.org/2005-06/index.html> -scroll down the webpage to find this sermon; make sure to read the reading first
  - A Fall Faith: Newsletter Reflection from October 2004 (*Handout in the back of this packet*)
  - Heart Buzz: Life Now! Radio Show:  
<http://www.lifenowradio.org/?q=node/120>
  - Unexpected Beauty: Life Now! Show:  
<http://www.lifenowradio.org/node/116>

#### **Pre-Work:**

Spiritual Exercise/Adventure: ***Find Your Favorite "Listening Spot."***

Clearly listening is about putting yourself in the right state of mind. But *the literal place we put ourselves into* is part of it too. That's what this "spiritual exercise" is all about: **making sure we don't short change the role that place plays in helping us to listen.** Simply put, we hear and listen better in some places than in others. Place and space is our ally when it comes to this tricky task of listening carefully.

So...What's your favorite "listening spot"? You may already have one; that's great. But if not, find one this week. And make it nearby. Here's a question to help: **"Where in your house or within walking distance from your house are you best able to "hear yourself think," "hear the holy," or "silence all those distracting and disorienting voices"?"**

**Then set a regular time to visit it!** We don't get any spiritual pats on the back only for having a "holy spot"; we've got to use it! So, 2-3 times this coming week at least. Go there and listen. And then come next week and tell us what happened. It's as simple—and hard—as that.

### **Questions to Think About Ahead of Time:**

For "Listening and re-connecting to your own voice":

- ◆ What do you need to hear?
- ◆ What is your life trying to tell you?
- ◆ What do you need to remember?

For "Opening to life's gifts":

- ◆ What spiritual resources "outside yourself" do you rely on and look to?
- ◆ How do you think of these resources theologically? As "God working through nature"? As "just a part of life"? What kind of "power" do these "outside resources" possess? Consciousness? Will? Intention?
- ◆ Have you ever been "saved"? If so, by what?

## **SESSION FOUR:**

### ***Our Journey Together II:***

#### **The Third Lifeline of the First Unitarian Journey & What Do We Do Now That the Class is Done?!**

#### **Overview:**

We look at the third “lifeline” of First Unitarian: “Serving needs greater than your own.” At First Unitarian, we approach service and social justice work through the lens of Jesus’ words: “You must lose your life to find it.” We are also inspired by Gandhi’s call for us to “be the change you want to see in the world!” We will discuss these ideas and have the pleasure of hearing from a few First Unitarian members about how connecting to needs greater than their own has altered and enriched their lives.

As this is our last session together, we also talk about “next steps.” Hopefully this four-week journey has left you with the desire to “continue walking.” We will talk about the various options for you to continue on your journey here at First Unitarian.

#### **Pre-Reading:**

- ◆ Contagious Sainthood, a sermon by Rev. Kaaren Anderson (Jan. 20, 2008)  
<http://www.rochesterunitarian.org/2007-08/20080120.html>
- ◆ To Share Their Burdens, a sermon by Rev. Scott Taylor (May 28, 2006)  
<http://www.rochesterunitarian.org/2005-06/20060528.html>
- ◆ Confessions of a Militant Mystic: Spirituality and Social Action – A Seamless Garment, lecture by the Rev. Richard S. Gilbert, minister emeritus of 1st Unitarian:  
<http://www.uuma.org/BerryStreet/Essays/BSE1996.htm>

Reading in preparation for the “next step” of joining a small group after this class:

- ◆ Why Journey Groups? Reading (*Handout at the back of this packet*)

#### **Pre-Work:**

- ◆ Read about our Greater Good Project at <http://www.rochesterunitarian.org/greatergood.html>
- ◆ Explore our Social Justice webpage at <http://www.rochesterunitarian.org/socialjustice.html>
- ◆ If you are not already connected to a small group here at First Unitarian, give some thought about making room in your life for it. We will share options at this last session. The “Why Journey Groups” reading will also help prepare you for this discussion.

#### **Questions to Think About Ahead of Time:**

- ◆ How do you understand the relationship between spiritual development and social justice? “Saving the world” and “savoring the world”?
- ◆ What role does sacrifice play in your efforts to put your faith into action?
- ◆ What role does community play?
- ◆ What role does empathy play? When you say “We are suffering,” what do you mean by “we”? What does it mean to you to “carry the burdens of others?”

# **“HANDOUTS”**

# FOR SESSION ONE:

## BELIEF SPECTRUM EXERCISE

(AT THE END OF THIS DOCUMENT)

## COMPLETE THE SENTENCE EXERCISE

### Ten Sentences Your Journey has Helped You Complete:

- 1) Human beings are...
- 2) Human beings are here to...
- 3) God is...
- 4) When people die they...
- 5) Love is...
- 6) Prayer is...
- 7) Justice is...
- 8) Evil is...
- 9) War is...
- 10) Joy is...

### Three More Just For You

**(Just for personal reflection; Will not be shared with group)**

- 1) I'm angry about...
- 2) I fear...
- 3) My deepest wound is...
- 4) My deepest love is...
5. I want...

# FOR SESSION THREE:

## ***Listen To Your Life Selections:* Writings of Frederick Buechner**

*Writer and preacher, Frederick Buechner is an ordained Presbyterian minister, but has never pastored a church and rarely attends one. His ministry is his writing: 32 novels and memoirs so far. Buechner and his wife live on a hilltop in Vermont, in what he calls "fathomless obscurity." But for many liberal Christians he's a prophet, if not a celebrity. You can learn more about him by visiting:  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week936/profile.html>*

"Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than 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."

**-from *Now and Then***

Every once in a while, life can be very eloquent. You go along from day to day not noticing very much, not seeing or hearing very much, and then all of a sudden, when you least expect it, very often something speaks to you with such power that it catches you off guard, makes you listen whether you want to or not. Something speaks to you out of your own life with such directness that it is as if it calls you by name and forces you to look where you have not had the heart to look before, to hear something that maybe for years you have not had the wit or the courage to hear.

**-from *Faith***

God speaks to us through our lives, we often too easily say. *Something* speaks anyway, spells out some sort of godly or godforsaken meaning to us through the alphabet of our years, but often it may take years and many further spellings out before we start to glimpse, or think we do, a little of what that meaning is. Even then we glimpse it only dimly, like the first trace of dawn on the rim of night, and even then it is a meaning that we cannot fix and be sure of once and for all because it is always alive and changing as we are alive and changing... Thus this listening is always an ongoing journey.

**-from *Listen to Your Life***

The alphabet of grace is full of sibilants—sounds that can't be shouted but only whispered: the sounds of bumblebees and wind and lovers in the dark, of whitecaps hissing up flat over the glittering sand and cars on wet roads, of crowds hushed in vast and vaulted places, the sound of your own breathing. I believe that in sibilants life is trying to tell us something. The trees, ghosts, dreams, faces, the waking up and eating and working of life, are trying to tell us something, to take us somewhere.

**-from *Listen to Your Life***

"Listen. Your life is happening. You are happening. A journey, years long, has brought each of you through thick and thin to this moment in time as mine has also brought me. Think back on that journey. Listen back to the sounds and sweet airs of your journey that give delight and hurt not and to those too that give no delight at all and hurt like Hell. Be not afraid. The music of your life is subtle and elusive and like no other—not a song with words but a song without words, a singing, clattering music to gladden the heart or turn the heart to stone, to haunt you perhaps with echoes of a vaster, farther music of which it is part. The question is not whether the things that happen to you are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak—even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked ten thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe

there is a God who speaks at all anywhere. He speaks, I believe, and the words he speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys. We cannot live our lives constantly looking back, listening back, lest we be turned to pillars of longing and regret, but to live without listening at all is to live deaf to the fullness of the music. Sometimes we avoid listening for fear of what we may hear, sometimes for fear that we may hear nothing at all but the empty rattle of our own feet on the pavement. But be not affeard, says Caliban, nor is he the only one to say it. "Be not afraid," says another, "for lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him...

- from *The Sacred Journey*

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush. "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I." Then he said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. -- Exodus 3:1-6

It is one of the great moments in Old Testament history. Perhaps it is the key moment. Moses was a stranger and exile in a strange land -- in Midian, on the east bank of the Gulf of Aqabah -- the land he fled to from Egypt, where he had murdered an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave. With death on his conscience, he had fled for his life, left everything behind. He married a Midianite woman, settled down, and was tending his father-in-law's sheep on the slopes of Mt. Horeb in the wilderness when suddenly the moment happened. A bush burst into flame. It blazed up, the heat of it rippling the air around it. Leaf and stem, it became all fire, crackling, leaping, as if the air itself was on fire. But though the bush burned, it did not burn up because it was a miraculous fire, which is to say a fire that Moses could not explain any more than we can explain it except by explaining it away as no real fire at all but only a figment of Moses's fiery imagination or the pious invention of a later time.

Then out of the flaming moment, a voice also flamed up, and of all the conceivable things it might have said, what it said was the name of Moses himself: "Moses," it said, "Moses," twice, and at the sound of his own name he was caught, as we also would have been caught, because we so much are our own names that at the sound of them we cannot help listening whether we want to or not because the voice that calls us by name is a voice that knows us by name, knows us, and has something to say to us, and for all we know everything may depend on our listening and answering. So Moses, the stranger and exile, stood there with the muck of the sheep on his shoes, guilty as hell of a man's murder and listened and answered.

"Here am I," he said, waiting for God only knows what will happen next, what lightning bolt to strike him on fire himself like the bush. Only what happened next instead was that when the voice out of the fire spoke again, what it said was, "Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." That scrubby patch of upland wilderness that the sheep had mucked up, that patch of no-man's-land that Moses had fled to for no motive holier than to save his own skin, was holy, the voice said, because it was as aflame with God as the bush was aflame with fire. Then the voice identified itself. It was God's voice, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the voice said. And then Moses hid his face, the book of Exodus says, "for he was

afraid to look at God," and well he might have been afraid if he had any inkling of what God was going to say next, because what God said next was as holy and fiery a word as there is in the Old Testament or anywhere else. That word was Go.

For those of us who are in the habit of putting on our best clothes and going to church from time to time, maybe it is a good idea to consider what a church is, of all things. What are all these churches we keep coming to, year in and year out? A church in the sense of a building is walls and a roof erected on the proposition that this ancient story of Moses and his burning bush is somehow true -- that however you choose to explain that story, you cannot all that easily explain it away. Something extraordinary took place a long time ago on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqabah, and our presence in churches, and the presence of millions like us, is evidence that the reverberations of that event are felt to this day. It is the reason why churches exist. It is the reason why we go to them, though we often forget it and go for shabbier reasons. The old church walls, the old church roofs were put up in the faith that if God is present anywhere in the world, he is present everywhere, and that if the ground that Moses stood on was holy, then the little patches of ground where churches stand are holy too. The whole earth is holy because God makes himself known on it, which means that in that sense a church is no holier than any other place. God is not more in a church than he is anywhere else. But what makes a church holy in a special way is that we ourselves are more present in it.

What I mean is that if we come to a church right, we come to it more fully and nakedly ourselves, come with more of our humanness showing, than we are apt to come to most places. We come like Moses with muck on our shoes -- footsore and travel-stained with the dust of our lives upon us, our failures, our deceits, our hypocrisies, because if, unlike Moses, we have never taken anybody's life, we have again and again withheld from other people, including often even those who are nearest to us, the love that might have made their lives worth living, not to mention our own. Like Moses we come here as we are, and like him we come as strangers and exiles in our way, because wherever it is that we truly belong, whatever it is that is truly home for us, we know in our hearts that we have somehow lost it and gotten lost. Something is missing from our lives that we cannot even name -- something we know best from the empty place inside us all where it belongs. We come here to find what we have lost. We come here to acknowledge that in terms of the best we could be we are lost.

That is the sadness and searching of what church is, of what we are in a church -- and then suddenly FIRE! The bush bursts into flame. And the voice speaks our names, whatever they are -- Peter, John, Ann, Mary. The heart skips a beat. "YOU! YOU!" the voice says. Does it? Does any voice other than a human voice speak in this place? Does any flame other than a candle flame on Christmas Eve ever leap here? I think so. I think if you have your ears open, if you have your eyes open, every once in a while some word in even the most unpromising sermon will flame out, some scrap of prayer or anthem, some moment of silence even, the sudden glimpse of somebody you love sitting there near you, or of some stranger whose face without warning touches your heart, will flame out -- and these are the moments that speak our names in a way we cannot help hearing. These are the moments that, in the depths of whatever our dimness and sadness and lostness are, give us an echo of a wild and bidding voice that calls us from deeper still. It is the same voice that Moses heard and that one way or another says, "GO! BE! LIVE! LOVE!" sending us off on an extraordinary and fateful journey for which there are no sure maps and whose end we will never fully know until we get there. And for as long as the moment lasts, we suspect that maybe it is true -- maybe the ground on which we stand really is holy ground because we heard that voice here. It called us by name.

- from *Secrets in the Dark; A Life in Sermons*

# ***“In Dark Woods”***

By Reverend Scott Tayler

Second in a Five-Part Sermon Series on Sinners & Saints

*“Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself / In dark woods, the right road lost”*  
-Dante, *Paradise Lost*

*There are two ways of remembering. One is to make an excursion from the living present back into the dead past. The old sock remembers how things used to be when you and I were young, Maggie. The faraway look in his eyes is partly the beer and partly that he’s really far away.*

*The other way is to summon the dead past back into the living present. The young widow remembers her husband, and he is there beside her. When Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me,” he was not prescribing a periodic slug of nostalgia!*

- Fredrick Buechner, from *A Room Called Remember*

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## **READING**

### ***The Moments of High Resolve***

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman— *minister, beloved Christian mystic and author and former spiritual advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Despite the dullness and barrenness of the days that pass,  
if I search with due diligence, I can always find a deposit left by some former radiance,  
But I had forgotten.  
At the time it was full-orbed, glorious, and resplendent.  
I was sure that I would never forget.

In the moment of its fullness,  
I was sure it would illumine my path for all the rest of my journey.  
I had forgotten how easy it is to forget.  
There was no intent to betray what seemed so sure at the time.  
My response was whole, clean, authentic.  
But little by little, there crept into my life the dust and grit of the journey.  
Details, lower-level demands,  
all kinds of cross currents-- nothing momentous, nothing overwhelming, nothing flagrant--- just  
wear and tear.

In the quietness of this place,  
surrounded by the all-pervading Presence of God, my heart whispers:  
Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve,  
that in fair weather or foul, in good times or in tempests,  
in the days when the darkness and the foe are nameless or familiar,  
I may not forget that to which my life is committed.

Keep fresh before me the moments of high resolve.

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## **SERMON**

So here are two of our UU favorites.

At a Church School picnic one Sunday, the head teacher stacked a pile of apples on one end of a table with a sign saying, "Take only one apple please -- God is watching." On the other end of the table was a pile of cookies, on which a second grade student had placed a sign saying, "Take all the cookies you want -- God is watching the apples."

And the other:

Sister Agnes, head nun at St Mary's catholic school asked her class, "Can anyone here tell me what we mean by sins of omission? Complete silenced followed. The class was obviously stumped. Finally one girl enthusiastically raised her hand and proudly answered: "Oh, aren't those are the sins we should have committed, but didn't?"

So there you have it: Our entire Unitarian Universalist view of sin in a nutshell: We consider it a joke.

And I say that this morning without judgment—I'm not trying to get in some kind of zinger here. I just want to get it right out there in the open, so we can wrestle with "why?"

So, why? Why has sin become something we religious liberals have stopped taking seriously. Why, when it comes to sin, are jokes are as good as it gets?

The most common answer of course is hurt. Many of us have been beat up by sin. It's been used in our past, and even our present, to ostracize, guilt and shame us. It's why a number of us left our previous faith home and we've done a lot of work to get over the baggage this sin-talk dumped in our lap.

So clearly, some of the laughing at sin has to do with having been beat up by it—or more precisely, it has to do with having got over it. You could say, we treat the laughter as a mark of liberation—a declaration **by some of us** that sin no longer has the destructive hold on us it used to. Freed from it, we can now laugh at it.

But the key phrase there is "some of us." Truth is most of us are what folks call the "unchruched." We weren't wounded by church; we didn't have any! We weren't made to feel guilty by church because we weren't made to go. We never had the chance to be beat up by sin.

So it's got to be something more. Having been hurt by sin just doesn't explain all the laughing.

And actually, Princeton Sociologist, Robert Wuthnow, agrees. He's got an entirely different theory about the jokes. But fair warning—it's not humorous in the slightest. You see, he is a statistician and after surveying thousands and thousands of congregations, he says you can easily predict which churches talk about sin by simply driving around and seeing what cars are parked outside. The nicer the cars, the less talk of sin. Wuthnow doesn't mince words; he says simply, "We've become too comfortable with ourselves to talk about sin." We laugh at it, he says, because we don't want to look at ourselves. If sin is a joke—the logic goes—nobody will use it against us. The laughing, according to Wuthnow and many others like him, is not because we no longer feel guilty, it's because we no longer WANT to feel guilty.

Which, of course, is true, isn't it? No doubt here: Yes, we certainly can be bums. Yes, we often resist disrupting our comfort with thoughts of our responsibilities to a hurting world. Yes, we

regularly fall victim to the limits of our empathy and compassion. Yes, we all feel guilty about not doing enough. None of us deny that.

And there I think is the catch: None of us deny it. This is what I think the experts like Withnow sometimes miss: We don't really deny the darkness within. We are not really shy about looking honestly at ourselves. And I know this better than most, because I'm there--sitting right beside you-- as you existentially and bravely venture into your guts and say "See! Look at that!!"

And, listen now. Here's the most important thing: When you say "See! Look at that!!," it's not guilt, corruption or evil you point to; more often than not, it's emptiness. Emptiness!

Listen closely to what one mother recently said to me about The Greater Good project.

"This project," she said, "woke me and my family up. It reminded us who we are—or at least who we want to be. It's so easy," she said, "to get lost in the midst of all the messages about buying and getting stuff. So easy to get lost in the speed and dizzy rhythm of daily life. The Greater Good helped us remember. It guided us back to the values we love."

Now you tell me if you think I'm off, but if I hear this correctly, it's not really the language of guilt and denial at all. Rather it sounds to me like the language of forgetfulness and feeling lost. That's what this mother is getting at. That's what she is saying is her deepest struggle. *And so is it any wonder that she would laugh at talk of sin! Is there any wonder that she wouldn't take it seriously when it so clearly doesn't take **her** seriously—when it so clearly misses the mark.*

Again, Howard Thurman writes, "Despite the dullness and barrenness of the days that pass... I was sure that I would never forget. But little by little, there crept into my life the dust and grit of the journey. Nothing momentous, nothing overwhelming, nothing flagrant--just wear and tear."

Now friends, again, you tell me if I'm wrong, but I think **that** hits the mark.

There's no doubt that our joking about and making fun of sin is easy to misunderstand, but I really don't think it's because we are arrogant or in denial. I don't think it's because we don't want to look at our shortcomings, failures and flaws. I think it's because today we are struggling with and hurting from something so **entirely** different than what the traditional and common talk of sin deals with.

Sin frames the human struggle as a battle against evil forces and deadly temptation. But if my friend and Howard Thurman are right, what **we** really need help dealing with—and *understanding*--is not so much the destructive powers of darkness and evil, but the alienating powers of forgetfulness.

Another way to put this is to say the danger of talk of sin is much different *and much more* than we've imagined. Liberals have historically resisted talk of sin because we've felt it prevents people from feeling good about themselves, but what worries me most is the way, today, sin prevents us from understanding ourselves! If the devil is out there putting everyone to sleep with a smile and a song, then it does no good telling people to be on watch for an angry guy with a pitch fork!. It's that smile and that song, we've got to keep our eye on!

Nobody helps us understand this better than a man named Neil Postman. His books are out of the limelight now, but they shouldn't be, especially his "*Amusing Ourselves to Death*." It made a splash back in the 1980's, but it has been largely forgotten now--which ironically proves

Postman's thesis. You see Postman purposely published the book in 1985 in order to take advantage of America having just made it through the year 1984 without any of the nightmarish predictions of George Orwell's book, 1984, ever having come true.

Most of us will remember Orwell's story: a dark tale about Big Brother--an oppressive governmental system controlling us with surveillance cameras, prisons, the elimination of books and voices of dissent, and a secret agency dedicated to the almost daily rewriting of history. When it was written in 1948, a good many feared that Orwell's story would come true. But the year 1984 came and went, and lo and behold democracy and free society stood firm. Even the most cynical had to admit that we prevailed. The worries were unfounded. Our freedom and our souls had survived.

Well sort of, said Neil Postman. In his book, he reminded the country that Orwell's was not the only dark prediction made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Right beside Orwell's *1984*, sat the equally powerful but very different prediction of Aldous Huxley, captured in his classic novel, *Brave New World*—a subtler tale with a much more complex enemy.

In Huxley's story, humanity of the future has become carefree, healthy and technologically advanced. Warfare and poverty have been eliminated and everyone is permanently happy due to government-provided stimulation. The irony is that, as ease and comfort have increased, many things humanity once held dear start to fade away—institutions such as family, culture, art, literature, science, religion, and philosophy all shrivel up do to lack of attention. No one removes them, people just stop being interested in them. Citizens are not oppressed, they simply become swept up in what Huxley calls “a glorious sea of amusements.”

I want to read a bit from the first pages of Postman's book.

“In Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. People come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much information that we would be reduced to passivity. ...Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture. ...In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.”

Uggghhh! Every time I read that, it puts a whole new spin on those nights I say to Kaaren, “You know, let's just curl up on the couch and watch stupid TV.” I mean, it's jarring, right?! **Really** jarring when you let it sink in. Postman is asking us to see the devil as having an entirely different face than the one we are used to looking out for. And of course, this all can seem a bit silly. After all, calling TV, shopping, an overload of information and a singular focus on job promotion the devil? Come on! What kind of ridiculous overstatement is that?! But this is Postman's point. We see these things as too harmless to treat them as a real threat, and that is precisely what gives them their power.

And of course it's all about moderation. This is not a throw-away-your-tv, give-up-shopping or quit-your-job sermon. Moderation is a given. But moderation requires us being deadly clear about that which needs moderating. And frankly our culture is not a great help in this regard. Indeed, when it comes to shopping, material success and stupid tv, too much is never enough—so the great unspoken American motto goes! Again, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.” Or to put that in terms of our theme today, Huxley is telling us if we do have a greatest sin, it is the sin of so easily forgetting the right things to love.

Which is, friends, exactly why I think we come back to church Sunday after Sunday. Forget what we've been told about church being a place of salvation and purification, or even a place of forgiveness, and maybe even forget the common focus on it being a place of community. ***First and foremost, church is a place of memory, or better yet, a place of remembering.*** Everything, friends, *everything* good about church flows directly from that!

Our worship matters to us because it helps us **remember** who we are and who we want to be. Our small groups save us because the stories of others **give us back** and help us re-write our own stories.

Our music is precious because it helps us **feel again** that mysterious spirit that moves deep in our breast.

And our acts of social justice transform us because they help us **remember** that the hard task of changing the world, *not the comfortable task of charity*, is the true sign of loving your neighbor.

I've heard people say that nothing important happens in church pews anymore. Hogwash! When someone tells you that, you tell them that memory happens—and that memory changes the world!

You tell them that it was in church pews that...

Cynthia remembered she once called herself a pacifist and so went home, picked up a dusty book off her shelf, got back in touch with that hippie-peace nik she used to be and loved so much,...and is now organizing monthly peace marches and planning to start a UU war-tax resisters support group right here in Rochester.

You tell them that it was in church pews that...

1000 Unitarians remembered that 150,000 dollars worth of Barbie dolls, Ipods, Wi video games and even new kitchen cabinets aren't nearly as important as dozens of Honduran latrines and water tanks, piles of inner city carrots and cucumbers and ensuring counseling and funds for urban families who've suffered the murder of a family member. [*This is a reference to our church's Greater Good Project.*]

You tell them that it was in church pews that...

this congregation remembered that the beauty of its buildings lies not so much in its world-renowned architecture as much as in how widely its doors are opened...and then having remembered this, the members committed to house RAIHN and bless their space with those who **need** space, not simply appreciate it.

You tell them that it was in church pews that...

Jack watched our kids do a Christmas Eve play about workers rights which reminded him how riled up he once got about the income divide and thus, just last week, he found himself down with Kaaren handing out pamphlets at the Crown Plaza Hotel calling them to allow in a union.

You tell them that it was in church pews that...

Tom remembered a good retirement portfolio wasn't what he once dreamed of—being an artist was. So he let go of that “successful” career 8 years early and started picking up the brush every day, not just once a month.

You tell them that it was in church pews that...

Kathy remembered that “assuming good intentions” and “kindness” are not simply quaint little virtues.

Steve remembered that a promotion and extra work hours are not nearly as important as the soul matters group he misses.

Lisa remembered to be gentle with her self and throw out that crap about perfection and “proving yourself.”

Karen remembered that “forgiving him” really was within her power.

And Robert remembered that men don’t have to “grin and bear it” and thus gave himself permission to weep all afternoon because he just received the diagnosis of Alzheimer’s.

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The dust, dullness and barrenness of our days. It doesn’t really sound all that dangerous or daunting, but it is. We live in a shallow and sleepy world where it is so easy to get lost and forget who we are. Given this, traditional talk of sin and salvation is dangerously distracting. Remembering who we are is the much more important task.

And so today, during this month of wrestling with the role of sin in our lives, I ask you not “What have you done wrong?” but “What is it you need to remember?” “What is it you never again want to forget?”

May we continue to help each other with that all important task. Amen.

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## ***A Fall Faith***

*(Newsletter article from October 2004)*

Last October was hard. A friend got married. He and his bride – soul mates. The ceremony – perfect. But at the reception his wife danced only a few times. She was tired. Again. Three weeks later, the tests came back. Cancer.

It was an Autumn experience –joy mixed with struggle, laughter with tears.

I’ve been thinking about my friend a lot lately. Not just because this is the anniversary of his wedding, but also because Autumn experiences characterize our days lately too. The joyful welcome of a new ministerial team is set next to the brutal murder of one of our members. The intergenerational fun of our Hunger Meal happens on the same Sunday as one of our families says goodbye to a parent heading off to war. Our adult education classes and small groups are overflowing, but so is our pastoral care list. After the services, talk of cancer treatments and ill parents floats right along side news of new births and babies taking their first step. One minute you talk to a friend who is getting divorced and the next minute you’re laughing with a widow giddy about her first date in years. All Autumn experiences.

I believe Fall is the most real of the seasons, the best guide to what life is all about. Whereas Spring directs our attention to buds breaking through death on their way to new life, Fall focuses us on radiant leaves in the process of dying. Spring has a way of leaving the tragic behind, promising eventual and inevitable triumph. Fall refuses to do that. It dazzles us with wonderful colors, but never lets us take our eyes off the cloudy skies, muddy ground, and fallen leaves. An opinionated season, Autumn forcefully denounces Spring's version of hope as rubbish. For Autumn, hope is not to be found in the faith that everything will work out and we will overcome, but in the belief that beauty can be grasped even in the midst of death, disappointment and pain. It challenges us to have the courage to embrace it all – the muddy ground and those amazing leaves.

My friend's wife died this summer. At her funeral, he didn't talk about the end; he talked about the waltz. For two months last winter, before the cancer took over her days, every Wednesday night, they danced. They kept their eyes on the gifts. In the midst of our Autumns, may we do the same.

With love, Scott

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# FOR SESSION FOUR:

## Why Journey Groups?

*An example of the vision that inspires us here at First Unitarian and an articulation of why we believe that "spiritual development and life's journey happens best when pursued within the context of a committed and caring circle of spiritual friends."*

*And why we nag you so much about finding a small group to join!*

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What is a circle of trust? It is the kind of carefully created space that invites the soul to make itself known. The kind of space where we can practice the paradox of "being alone together," a space that welcomes our inwardness even as it connects us to the gifts and challenges of community, and to the larger world.

- Parker J. Palmer, from "A Hidden Wholeness"

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.

- adapted from "Proverbs of Ashes" by Rebecca Parker

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

- Rufus Jones, Quaker historian, theologian and a philosopher

### **Sitting in Circles:**

***In our journey toward inner truth, we need a supportive community--a circle of trust-- to guide us.***

*By Parker J. Palmer*

Five years after leaving Berkeley, I found myself sitting in circles again. This time it was at Pendle Hill, a Quaker living-Learning community near Philadelphia, where I spent eleven years starting in the mid-1970s. But these circles, I soon discovered, were of a different sort. They were not heady, aggressive, self-congratulatory, or manipulative. They were gentle, respectful, and reverent in the way they honored self and world, and slowly they changed my life.

In these quiet Quaker circles, people were doing neither the amateur psychotherapy nor the faux politics that I had experienced in Berkeley. Instead, they were doing therapy and politics rightly

understood: reaching in toward their own wholeness, reaching out toward the world's needs, and trying to live their lives at the intersection of the two.

In these quiet Quaker circles, I saw people challenged, but I never saw anyone harmed. I witnessed more personal transformations than I had seen before, and I watched more people embrace their social responsibilities as well. That was when I started to understand why Quakers, who have always been few in number, have often been overrepresented in the great social issues of their time.

The circles of trust I experienced at Pendle Hill are a rare form of community--one that supports rather than supplants the individual quest for integrity--that is rooted in two basic beliefs. First, 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. Second, we all need other people to invite, amplify, and help us discern the inner teacher's voice for at least three reasons:

The journey toward inner truth is too taxing to be made solo: lacking support, the solitary traveler soon becomes weary or fearful and is likely to quit the road.

The path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company: finding our way involves clues that are subtle and sometimes misleading, requiring the kind of discernment that can happen only in dialogue.

The destination is too daunting to be achieved alone: we need community to find the courage to venture into the alien lands to which the inner teacher may call us.

I want to dwell for a moment on that little word discern, which means "distinguish between things." I think again of C. S. Lewis's tales of Narnia, that land of inwardness the children enter through the back of the magical wardrobe. There is much in Narnia that is good and beautiful, especially the voice of truth--the voice of Aslan, the great lion--that is sometimes heard in the land. But there are other voices in Narnia as well, voices of temptation, deception, darkness, and evil. It takes four children, a variety of guides, and seven volumes of pitfalls and perils to sift through this mix of messages and travel toward the truth.

Occasionally, I hear people say, "The world is such a confusing place that I can find clarity only by going within." Well I, for one, find it at least as confusing "in here" as it is "out there"--usually more so!--and I think most people do. If we get lost in New York City, we can buy a map, ask a local, or find a cabbie who knows the way. The only guidance we can get on the inner journey comes through relationships in which others help us discern our leadings.

But the kind of community I learned about at Pendle Hill does not presume to do that discernment for us, as communities sometimes do: "You tell us your version of truth, and we will tell you whether you are right or wrong!" Instead, a circle of trust holds us in a space where we can make our own discernments, in our own way and time, in the encouraging and challenging presence of other people.

The man from Agriculture[reference to an earlier story in the book about a government official who realized he was betraying his "obligations to the land."] went on retreat with peers who doubtless could have offered him seasoned counsel about his dilemma. But at this moment on his journey--a moment when it was critical that he take his own soul seriously--he needed people who were willing to abstain from giving advice. He needed people who knew how to invite his soul to speak and allow him to listen.

Blessedly, the people he sat with, guided by the principles and practices that shape a circle of trust, never tried to "set him straight." Instead, they created a communal space around him where he could distinguish the inner voice of truth from the inner voice of fear. And as he spoke the truth he heard from within, these people bore witness to his self-discovery, sharpening his sense of self and strengthening his resolve to follow the inner teacher.

Here is another story about what can happen when a community welcomes the soul. In a circle I hosted, there was a good man who had been wounded by racism. In the course of our three-day retreat, he spoke only once or twice. Most of the time he sat in silence--his face, it seemed to me, a mask of sorrow. Because he was an African American in a predominantly white group, I feared not only that he was in pain but that we were in some way causing it.

For three days, I worried that this man felt like an outsider even here, in a circle that was supposed to be safe. But following the ground rules of this form of community, neither I nor anyone else tried to "fix" him. Instead, we held him and his soul in a quiet and respectful way--though it took a mighty act of will to keep from offering him consolation.

On the last morning of our retreat, I got up early. Sitting in the common room with a cup of coffee, I picked up the journal that the retreat center's staff had left there for guests to comment on their experience. On the last page, I found these words, written in a bold scrawl, signed by the man about whom I was so worried.

Thank you for helping to deal with some of my anger. Life is too short to walk a path filled with spurs. I am not completely healed, but the process has begun. I want to give back the love and caring that was given to me. This retreat made me deal with my ghost!! Georgia/Nam/TX were all my pits. Now that the healing has started, I feel strong and for the first time capable of feeling some sense of peace.

Reading those words, I realized that for the past three days, this man had been talking with his inner teacher, going much deeper in that dialogue than he could have by talking with us. Once again I felt profoundly grateful for the circles I first experienced at Pendle Hill--grateful for what they taught me about the reality and power of the soul, about a way of being together that allows the soul to make a claim on our lives, and about the miracles that can happen when we do.

If we want to renew ourselves and our world, we need more and more circles of this sort, where people who work in a large corporation can acknowledge the secret hidden in plain sight; where a conflicted farmer-turned-bureaucrat can remember that he reports to the land; where a person wounded by racism can take a step toward healing. We need more and more circles from which we can return to the world less divided and more connected to our own souls.

Diana Chapman Walsh, president of Wellesley College, a leader whose integrity I deeply admire, has written about the small-scale "circles" she convenes to maintain her sense of wholeness in a complex and stressful job: "I...come together...with people who bring out my better self, friends with whom I can be...authentic.... I make it a point to connect, whenever possible, with [people] with whom I have a history of shared joy and shared pain...who...call forth in me this feeling of safety."

- Excerpt from *A Hidden Wholeness*

# STARTING POINT

## Belief Spectrum Exercise

I'VE BEEN A UU FOR 1 YEAR OR LESS.....20 YEARS OR MORE

I'M A THEIST.....AGNOSTIC.....ATHEIST / NON-THEIST

FOR THE THEISTS:

GOD HAS "PERSONHOOD"(possesses consciousness, will, intention, & power).....GOD IS AN EVENT OR EXPERIENCE(impersonal happening or feeling)

FOR THE AGNOSTICS:

I LIVE AS THOUGH THERE IS A GOD.....I LIVE AS THOUGH THERE IS NO GOD

FOR THE ATHEISTS:

I'VE HAD EXPERIENCES TO CONVINC ME THERE IS NO GOD.....NEVER HAD TO USE A GOD CONCEPT TO MAKE SENSE OF MY EXPERIENCE

THE UNIVERSE IS A FRIENDLY PLACE.....NEUTRAL / INDIFFERENT PLACE.....HOSTILE PLACE

*THE UNIVERSE HAS CONCERN FOR HUMAN BEINGS.....UNIVERSE IS INDIFFERENT*

*THE FUTURE SEEMS HOPEFUL.....THE FUTURE SEEMS SCARY*

HUMAN BEINGS ARE INHERENTLY GOOD.....HUMAN BEINGS ARE DEEPLY FLAWED

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS INSPIRES ME.....JESUS AND JESUS TALK TURN ME OFF

I AM RELIGIOUS.....I AM SPIRITUAL

I HAVE A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE.....I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THAT MIGHT MEAN FOR ME

SIN HAS AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN MY SPIRITUAL LIFE/THOUGHT.....SIN PLAYS NO ROLE/UNIMPORTANT

GRACE HAS AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN MY SPIRITUAL LIFE/THOUGHT.....GRACE PLAYS NO ROLE/UNIMPORTANT

I'VE BEEN SAVED OR TRANSFORMED OR MIRACULOUSLY HEALED.....THOSE IDEAS DON'T MAKE SENSE OR SPEAK TO ME

ORGANIZED RELIGION IS MOSTLY A POSITIVE FORCE IN LIFE.....MOSTLY A NEGATIVE INFLUENCE

RELIGION STARTS FOR ME IN THE MIND.....RELIGION STARTS FOR ME IN AN EXPERIENCE

I AM NERVOUS ABOUT THIS "STARTING POINT THING".....I CAN'T WAIT FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

I'M WILLING TO BRING PIE NEXT WEEK.....I'LL EAT, BUT CAN'T COOK FOR MY LIFE