

Small Group Ministry
Group Session Plan
Living the Grace of Love: Personal Experiences

Opening Words “Community Means Strength” by [Starhawk](#)

We are all longing to go home to some place
we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned
we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.
Community.
Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion
without having the words catch in our throats.
Somewhere a circle of hands
will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,
voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.
Community means strength
that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.
Arms to hold us when we falter.
A circle of healing.
A circle of friends.
Someplace where we can be free.

Check In/Sharing

Topic/Activity “In Sweet Company” by Margaret Wolff

We sit together and I tell you things,
Silent, unborn, naked things
That only my God has heard me say.
You do not cluck your tongue at me
Or roll your eyes
Or split my heart into a thousand thousand pieces
With words that have little to do with me.
You do not turn away because you cannot bear to see
Your own unclaimed light shining in my eyes.
You stay with me in the dark.
You urge me into being.
You make room in your heart for my voice.
You rejoice in my joy.
And through it all, you stand unbound
By everything but the still, small Voice within you.
I see my future Self in you
Just enough to risk
Moving beyond the familiar,
Just enough to leave
The familiar in the past where it belongs.
I breathe you in and I breathe you out
In one luxurious and contented sigh.
In sweet company
I am home at last.

“Gentleness in Living” by [Richard S. Gilbert](#)

Be gentle with another—

It is a cry from the lives of people battered
By thoughtless words and brutal deeds;
It comes from the lips of those who speak them,
And the lives of those who do them.

Who of us can look inside another and know what is there
Of hope and hurt, or promise and pain?
Who can know from what far places each has come
Or to what far places each may hope to go?

Our lives are like fragile eggs.
They crack and the substance escapes.
Handle with care!
Handle with exceedingly tender care
For there are human beings within,
Human beings as vulnerable as we are,
Who feel as we feel,
Who hurt as we hurt.

Life is too transient to be cruel with one another;
It is too short for thoughtlessness,
Too brief for hurting.
Life is long enough for caring,
It is lasting enough for sharing,
Precious enough for love.

Be gentle with one another.

Questions to deepen the conversation:

- 1) How do the poems resonate with you?
- 2) Where or how do you experience the *Grace of Love* in the presence of another?
- 3) Where or how do you *Live the Grace of love* in your relationships at church? At home? At work? In the Community?

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words “This Day is Mine” Raymond John Baughn from *The Sound of Silence*, 1965

This day of mine.
May I remember this
and look for something new,
something perhaps I’ve
starred at all my life
and never seen.

There's music and
there's love and with and
something that can lift
the mind.

May I discover these
and know the light's
not false and foreign
when I go
Toward wonder.

Prepared by Rev. Carie Johnsen, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta,
Maine, November 2019

Small Group Ministry
Group Session Plan
Living the Grace of Love: In community

Opening Words “Love Is Our Greatest Purpose” by [Jay E Abernathy, Jr](#)

We affirm that love is our greatest purpose.
Accepting one another is the truest form of faithful living.
The search for truth is our constant star.
We pledge our hearts, minds, and hands:
To challenge injustice with courage;
To find hope in times of fear;

And to live out our Unitarian Universalist values
every day as a beloved community.

Thus do we covenant with each other
and with all that is sacred in life.

Check In/Sharing

Topic/Activity “The Happy Accident” by [Carie J Johnsen](#)

The tale I am about to tell is based on a true story. It is a tale woven from the stories of those who remember. It is a tale of wayward travels, a tale of the stranded tourist.

Some of the people who recounted the events described it as a *Happy Accident*.

The story begins in early October, during the peak of the leaf peeping season when a couple, Hugh and Betsy, found themselves stranded in the middle of Maine.

Just a few weeks earlier Hugh and Betsy had departed their home state of Colorado. Confident with their itinerary, and with the safety and comfort of traveling across the country in their motor home, they were enjoying a leisurely journey to their destination – the Maritime Provinces of Canada.

And then the unfortunate circumstances, their motor home breaking down in Central Maine along the Turnpike. To add to this seemingly ill-fated incident, the parts to repair this home on wheels would not only need to be specially ordered but also specially manufactured because the replacement for their rusted out gas tank was no longer available; thus Hugh and Betsy would need to take up residence in the capital city of Augusta for an unknown period of time.

So together making the best of their situation, Hugh and Betsy unhitched the Jeep they were towing and called for their abiding companion, the family pet, a canine traveler to join them the car.

After finding a motel and settling into their new temporary residence, this faithful Christian couple picked up the local newspaper in search of a church to attend the following day.

One might expect they would choose a familiar faith community to worship in but not these adventurous travelers. They scoured the paper in search of a church that had an 11:00 a.m. service. A simple criterion for the stranded tourists who were seeking a spiritual community to rest their weary souls.

The service title “Heterosexuals Coming-Out,” although may have been intriguing, had nothing to do with their decision to attend or not attend. It was quite simple, Unitarian Universalist Community Church was the only gig in town with an 11:00 am service.

And so they arrived at the inn (if you will), they entered the sanctuary, received an Order of Service and joined the ingathering of members in the pews. The tourist, strangers now among many, settled into their place with the same assuredness that had them traveling thousands of miles away from home.

During the welcome portion of the service, they bravely stood up and introduced themselves as guests traveling through from Colorado.

As the welcome continued the couple heard the open invitation to attend the elder luncheon being served following the service. They heard the speaker offer a gentle encouragement for all people to self-select their status as an elder.

It is here that we, the members and friends of UUCC, become more deeply engaged in the *Happy Accident*. The couple came to elder lunch, picked a seat among a smaller group of strangers and waited to be served a meal.

As they enjoyed their meal of salad, soup and dessert, the couple quietly told their story to a table of 6. One person recalled how happy and friendly the couple was despite such an unfortunate event. She recalls them being nice people who enjoyed their lunch. She remembers how they seemed so content and happy they were to be with us.

The following week, still stranded in Augusta, Hugh and Betsy arrived back at church. They took up there now familiar seats in the sanctuary and quiet contemplated the 11:00 service. No longer strangers in our midst, a few knowing members greeted them and called them by name.

And then again on October 24th, they joined the congregation now as regulars in the pews. They settled quietly into what had now become their usual spot for the leave taking service; ironically this would also be the week they took leave of Augusta and Unitarian Universalist Community Church.

In early November, Hugh and Betsy finally returned to Colorado taking with them a memory of Unitarian Universalists in Augusta.

Hugh and Betsy returned in their jeep to Colorado leaving behind their motor home (Yes, it was still awaiting the newly manufactured gas tank.) and a memory of the time when two stranded tourists found a warm hearth, a welcoming faith community and the exchange of simple gifts.

When I spoke with Hugh later, he kindly reported how much he enjoyed his time in our community. He shared with me that his cross country trip was about seeing the country with his wife Betsy before he began cancer treatment. And as one might expect he was approaching chemotherapy with as much optimism as a broken motor home in Maine.

Hugh said one of their treasured memories was there time with us. They so cherished the open philosophies, the rich diversity of people, the hospitality of many. He sends greeting to the congregation with the added comment, “tell the congregation they have a very special gift they are giving.”

May this tale of the *Happy Accident* be a vision for radical hospitality in this community.

May the accidental tourist and the local seekers and those searching for sanctuary from their suffering find companionship in the journey on the corner of Winthrop and Summer Streets.

Questions to deepen the conversation:

- 1) What tales of radical hospitality are you creating or witnessing at UUCC?
- 2) Are you *Living the Grace of Love* by widening your circle of community?
- 3) Look closely at your social patterns and habits, where are you building silos, clinging to the familiar, and resting in your comfort zone?
- 4) Where do you witness closed circles in the wider church community?

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words “Each of Us is an Artist” by Arthur Gramm from *73 Voices, 1972*

Each of us is an artist
Whose task it is to shape life
Into some semblance of the pattern
We dream about. The molding
Is not of self alone, but of shared
Tomorrow and times we shall never see.
So let us be about our task.
The materials are very precious
And perishable.

Prepared by Rev. Carie Johnsen, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta,
Maine, November 2019

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Living the Grace of Love: Faith in Action

Opening Words by Wade H. McCree, Jr.

To me, one's religion is expressed in the manner in which one relates to other human beings. If one fights relentlessly against injustice, want, hate, and every form of exploitation, then one is a religious person. The love of God is not expressed by ritual or ceremony, but by loving.

Check In/Sharing

Topic/Activity "Transcending Boundaries" by [Yvonne Seon](#)

When I was a child, I would stand and gaze at the starry firmament and contemplate infinity. As I stood there, the boundary that is time dissolved; I expanded my Spirit to fill the boundary that is space. My being stilled and all fear, anxiety, and anguish disappeared. Forgotten were the chores, the homework, the ordinary around me.

Transcending boundaries was fun in those days. But, as I reached adulthood, it became more difficult. More and more, the world was with me as I did chores and homework. More and more, my own fears were with me as I encountered others. More and more, I was aware of the boundaries of race, class, age, and sex. I felt myself cringe as the bantering youth in the street came nearer. I felt myself become tearful as I encountered a senior citizen living with pain or the limited choices of a fixed income. I felt myself become angry as I was subjected to the indignities of being rejected by others because I am Black, because I am a woman, or because of the blind person or the openly gay person I was with. I felt myself become unwilling to acknowledge my oneness with the addicted person who is my friend or the homeless people sleeping on the benches in the park.

Today, transcending boundaries is hard work. For one thing, I've created more of them since I was young, and I've built them higher and stronger than they once were. For another thing, I'm much more self-righteous and much less humble than I was then. Sometimes, when I am at my best, I remember that the "other" I distinguish myself from could be me in another time, another place, another circumstance. Then, I remember the words of a colleague who observed that it is "my racism, my sexism, my homophobia" that I am called upon to address. So, I take a few deep breaths and begin to release the fears that are the boundaries between me and my fellow humans.

Questions to deepen the conversation:

- 1) What boundaries are easiest or hardest for you to transcend? Where do you still stumble and rise?
- 2) Who or what helps you to see where you are rejecting your oneness?
- 3) How might your *Living the Grace of Love* be a bridge to transcending boundaries? What would it look like? Be specific.

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words “Love is All” by Lewis H. Latimer

What is there in this world, beside our loves,
To keep us here?
Ambition's course is paved with hopes deferred,
With doubt and fear.
Wealth brings no joy,
And brazen-throated fame
Leaves us at last
Nought but an empty name.
Oh soul, receive the truth,
E'er heaven sends thy recall:
Nought here deserves our thought but love,
For love is all.

Prepared by Rev. Carie Johnsen, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta,
Maine, November 2019

Small Group Ministry
Group Session Plan
Living the Grace of Love: Interdependent Web

Opening Words “So are we bound together” by [Elizabeth Lerner Maclay](#)

As drops of rain that find each other and build to become a track, a rivulet, a stream, a river, a sea, so are we drawn together; so are we fortunate to find each other; so are we bound together, on this shared passage toward an unknown ocean and eternity.

Check In/Sharing

Topic/Activity “A Strong Reverence for Life” by [Carol Hepokoski](#)

Those of us who call ourselves religious Humanists have a strong reverence for life. Many of us experience a deep sense of awe before the mystery of life and death, those powers greater than ourselves. We share a respect for science and reason, and we are willing to live with ambiguity to live without definitive answers. We share a deep concern about injustice and the fate of human life, indeed, of all life on this planet, our home in the universe. We identify with the human story, even as we recognize it as intimately tied to the story of the rest of this world.

My environmentalism and my Humanism are inextricably related. My Humanism tells me that human life is important and worthy of respect and care. My environmentalism tells me that to be human is to be part of an interdependent circle of all life; it is counterproductive to imagine ourselves as separate. My knowledge of today’s world informs me that Planet Earth and, thus, human life are in danger because of the threat of global warming. I want to see life, including human life, preserved and thriving on our planet. My environmental Humanism compels me to work to reduce the causes of climate change — the human practices that threaten the survival of life on earth.

Questions to deepen the conversation:

- 1) How does your Humanism or Atheism or Unitarian Universalism or Buddhism, or Christianity or earth centered spirituality inform your reverence for the many manifestations of creation?
- 2) Where do you experience or manifest the *Grace of Love* in the interdependent web of all existence?

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words “Shine!” by [Mary Edes](#)

Like the cosmic dust following after a great Perseid meteor, we are the living remnants of time and all that has come to pass in its wake—briefly shining lights on the way to eternity. We are only visible to the naked eye for an instant. Take this moment to shine like the start dust you are. May the light of our time on earth shine to bless the world and each other. Shine. Shine. Shine.