

## **Chalice Circles**

**Small Group Ministry Program**  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley  
2008-9



### **Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley**

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### **Participant's Handbook**

### **What a Chalice Circle is Intended to Be**

- A way to deepen our spirituality through a shared practice.
- A way to share our thoughts on life's big questions.
- A way to connect across age, gender, ethnic, economic and other differences.
- A way to be engaged, included, and heard in a safe, nurturing environment.
- A way to bring together the newer and the long time members in our community.
- A way to deepen our practice of shared UU principles.
- A way to practice service from within a small community.
- A way to develop our connections with the rest of the congregation.

### **What a Chalice Circle is NOT Intended to Be:**

- A social club, although ties between church members deepen through Chalice Circles.
- A Debate society, although many important topics are discussed.
- A support or therapy group, although the atmosphere is positive.
- A worship service, although the meetings and topics have a strong spiritual tone.
- A rigid template of activities, although there are general guidelines to follow.
- A closed club, although groups must be limited in size to be effective.

## **More Blocks to Listening**

### **Advising**

The desire to solve problems is strong in many people. Rather than simply taking in the experience being conveyed, some people begin to think of ways to solve the issues being raised in the speaker's experiences. With their minds thus occupied in finding solutions, the listener can miss the full complexity and richness of the speaker's story.

### **Reacting to Loaded Words**

Most people have hot button words or issues that raise an emotional response in them. When a hot button is pushed by some word or experience in the story being related, it is very difficult to continue to listen empathically. If that happens to you during a sharing, it helps to remember that words have different meanings in different cultures. And the narrative context surrounding the word or issue can also change its meaning. Try to remain fully attentive to the nuances of the story to get a clearer understanding of the speaker's true intent. Understanding can dampen strong emotional reactions.

### **Filtering**

Filtering information is a necessary aspect of making meaning out of the multitude of data that surrounds us. We pick out what is immediately relevant and then let our minds wander. This kind of scanning for relevant data is a habit that can safely be abandoned in the context of a spiritual group. Filtering can harm our ability to fully appreciate the complexity of the experience being narrated.

## Blocks to Listening

Some people are naturally talented listeners and others have developed a skill for listening attentively. But everyone has trouble listening at times. Since the core of the Chalice Circle experience involves speaking and listening to each other, being distracted attenuates the experience. Here are some classic things people do instead of listening:

### Rehearsing

People sometimes get so caught up in figuring out how to express their own thoughts when their turn comes, that they forget to listen to the person who is speaking. If this happens to you, you might write one-word reminders of what you mean to say on a note card before the meeting until you become more confident. Or you could ask the Circle to wait a moment while you organize your thoughts.

### Judging

One of the most significant barriers to attentive listening is to listen for evaluation rather than to listen for understanding. A judging listener hears their own internal monologue rather than walking in the other person's shoes. Even if that judgment is positive rather than a criticism, it undermines the culture of acceptance in a Circle.

### Comparing

People sometimes compare the speaker's reactions and experiences with their own. Calling up their own experience takes their attention from the particularity and integrity of the speaker's story. And comparing reactions invites assessment.

## Chalice Circle Format

- Size:** 6-12 members, including a facilitator.
- Meetings:** Usually twice a month.
- Format:** Opening: Welcome, chalice lighting, and a reading that links the group to its larger organization and transcendent purpose.
- Check-in: What, briefly, is going on in your life today?
- Silence: A two minute period for reflection and grounding
- Content: Sharing the story you have chosen to tell of your experience on the topic.
- Check-out: How is everyone feeling now?
- Closing: Extinguishing the chalice, closing reading, farewells.
- Covenant:** Participants form an agreement on how they want to function as a group.
- Service Project:** Each Circle chooses a service project to do as a group in the spring.

## A Spiritual Practice

Small Group Ministry is a spiritual practice that creates a sacred space where we can tell the stories of our lives, be heard, and listen deeply to those of our companions. This is the heart of the Chalice Circle experience; all of the other parts of the format are designed to support this.

It has three parts. The first is preparation to discuss the topic. At the end of each meeting the facilitator passes out a slip of paper with the topic for the next meeting, expanded by a number of leading questions to help the participants focus their thoughts. This lead-time is important for a person's thinking process to consider the most relevant experiences and to build the courage to speak their truth.

The second part is the exercise of telling that story in a protected space to a group of people who are similarly vulnerable. This is a wonderful experience: to be listened to. Most participants don't realize how rare this is and how much they want it until they experience it in a Small Group Ministry setting. It is a feeling of being both known and valued.

The third element of this experience is deep listening. This comes naturally to people who have practiced meditation, because they have trained themselves to empty their minds and listen to their breath, to be open to the sounds of the environment, to allow their own feelings and thoughts to dissolve and dissipate. This same attentiveness and egolessness is the hallmark of deeply listening to the experiences being narrated by fellow members of a Chalice Circle. It is a matter of standing out of the way so as to empathically participate in the speaker's experience. The result is a kaleidoscope of experiences around the topic of the meeting.

## Blocks to Authentic Sharing

### Speaking off-the-cuff

When hearing a new topic announced, the first thing that comes to mind is rarely the experience with the greatest importance in your life. Often it takes many days to evaluate your fund of experience on a particular topic to discover which ones formed part of who you are. A typical progression starts with the experience I would tell at a party, because it is punchy or fun. Then I might consider an experience I would tell a friend, if the moment were right. Then my mind might run over all of those experiences that are locked-up way down below waiting for an analyst to dig them out. Finally I would settle on an experience that sits somewhere in my comfort zone with my Chalice Circle. This is why the Chalice Circle program gives its participants the two weeks between meetings to do this thinking.

### Coming out of the sacred space

Either during check-in or at the time of sharing, sometimes the talk migrates back to the mundane sphere of shaggy-dog stories or complaining. Chatty talking evades the central questions surrounding the topic and is often an expression of fear. Side comments, jokes, and rolling the eyes also return the conversation to a superficial level through disrespect. Another sign of disrespect, even if it isn't intended as such, is distracted and distracting behavior such as coming late, taking notes, or riffling in a purse or briefcase. Conducting the meeting at a superficial level will bore the participants. They will then lose interest, ending the Circle.

## **Belonging**

In our society of frequent re-locations and diminished family support, people come to our churches to find friends, and community, they come for a sense of intimacy, a safe place in which they can be accepted, they come looking for a place to belong.

When a person feels he or she belongs, this implies being known by the other members of a group and being accepted just as they are. A person must trust that no member of the group will take advantage of a weakness to score some personal gain. And further, a person must believe and feel that other members of the group care about his or her welfare enough to help if needed.

All of these requirements of belonging are cultivated by the format and rules of engagement in a *Chalice Circle*. After listening each other into being for several months, people report feelings of gratitude and trust for the other members. The intimacy of a Circle creates a mini community within the larger church. Participants cite feelings of connectedness as one of a *Chalice Circle's* greatest gifts.

## **A Safe Space**

None of the above values would be possible without having first secured a safe space to hold the group's interactions. The *Chalice Circle* format, a group's covenant, the vigilance of the facilitator, and the good will of the participants all contribute to forming a safe space. A safe space decreases the level of fear, emboldens the shy, and allows progressively deeper sharing.

## **A Sacred Space**

"As a spiritual practice, Small Group Ministry focuses on process, not problems. It aims to treat all content of a person's life in the same way: as a moment worthy of one's full, undivided attention. It does not aim to offer advice, guidance, and direction or to resolve personal problems. It simply stops time so that the full presence of each person is acknowledged and appreciated in that moment. The idea is not to work on problems. The idea is to share experiences. Each moment is packed full of the joys and sorrows, the victories and defeats, the thoughts and ideas that make each lived moment of our life an experience worthy of our time....As people pay active attention to the details of each other's lives, this gathered community can extend a moment of time until it is filled to overflowing with the thoughts and feelings that turn time into an experience that is not fleeting, but abiding, because we are now fully present. Sacred time begins here." Thandeka

## **Mutual Ministry**

In Unitarian Universalism we recognize that each person has learned some share of truth and each has gained some hard won wisdom. Sharing this in a life story is a form of ministry. And giving your full attention to another's life experience is also a form of ministry. We bear witness to each other's worth and dignity.

## The Paradox of Formality

In Robert Hill's book on the growth of Small Group Ministry among Unitarian Universalist congregations he stresses the importance of adhering to the formal structure of the format. That formality allows the participants greater freedom of expression than would be possible without it.

Knowing that you can't interrupt, frees you to listen.

Knowing that you will not be interrupted, frees you to explore your thoughts in your own way.

Knowing that you can't help the speaker, frees you to enter into the speakers' experience.

Knowing that no one will try to help you, frees you to tell your story with complete honesty.

Knowing that the opening rituals lead to a sacred space, frees you to abandon mundane conventions.

Knowing that you can get something off your chest at check-in, frees you to be fully present in the Circle.

Knowing that you can express concerns at check-out, frees you from harboring resentments.

Knowing that there is nothing you can "DO", frees you to "BE".

And being together in a small supportive community is the essence of the Chalice Circle spiritual practice.

## Speaking and Being Heard

On first joining a Circle a participant might think, "I can't talk about myself for 5 minutes. I'll run out of things to say. I will want to hear other people's responses. Besides, no one will want to listen to me that long." After experiencing this sharing, most participants deeply appreciate being able to speak about a personal experience and explore its meanings for 5 whole uninterrupted minutes.

Ordinary conversation is constrained by the customs and conventions of etiquette, which are tuned towards inclusiveness and kindness. One such custom is to include the other's interests in what we say and another calls for openness to an immediate response. Then too, when others are speaking, we listen with a view towards adding our own thoughts. A conversation, by its nature, tells a story together, and this is very good.

Speaking and listening in a Small Group Ministry setting violates some of these customs. We may feel awkward, or even impolite, speaking solely from our own experience, and it may feel unsociable not to be framing a response as we listen. But the rewards are great for using this format.

This practice of speaking our truth can help us to become more aware of our experience as uniquely ours. The support of the group is crucial for this expansion of self-awareness: without them we wouldn't bother to examine our experiences so deeply and without suspending some conventions of ordinary discourse we wouldn't express them. In the Small Group Ministry literature this process is described as "listening each other into being".