

Curriculum

Connection as Spiritual Practice

A Love Beyond Belief™ Experience with the Rev. Dr. Thandeka

First Unitarian Church of Dallas

Three Scheduled Course Dates:

- *Wednesdays 1:00PM – 2:30PM Central Daylight Time: September 2, 2020 – September 23, 2020*
 - *Thursdays 7:30PM – 9:00PM Central Daylight Time: September 3, 2020 – September 24, 2020*
 - *Saturdays 11:00AM – 12:30PM Central Daylight Time: September 5, 2020 – September 26, 2020*
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I. Course Description

The purpose of this four-week course is to help persons explore the spiritual content of their inner lives and reach out for fellowship with others.

Protocols:

- Recounting personal narratives
- Learning through shared stories and reflections
- Respecting and honoring personal experiences
- Creating a covenantal community of trust and care
- Practicing compassionate engagement with oneself and others

II. Course Goals

Persons will have greater access to the rejuvenating, spiritual realm of their bodies and minds. They will get to know their true self, namely the self that, as the poet Derek Walcott says, has always loved you. Participants will be able to define what the term *spirituality* means in their own personal terms. And they will be able to answer the following questions:

- How does your journey inward become a spiritual experience that connects you to others?
- When your body feels part of all existence, why does your mind feel wonder and awe?
- Why is grace a hallowed feeling found in a loving heart?
- Why do you feel free and happy when you journey inside yourself and reach the stars?
- Why do you feel like a pilgrim on a sacred journey into your own life?

III. Course Outcomes

Persons who take this course will have the experiential foundation and develop the mental clarity requisite for a spiritual life that helps them feel loved and cared for. They will feel gratitude and joy in uplifting ways that can prompt acts of lovingkindness in the world.

IV. Course Objectives

The goals of this course will be achieved by:

- Listening to others with care and compassion.
- Paying attention to the longings of one's own heart with compassion rather than judgment.
- Practicing nonjudgmental awareness.
- Establishing within oneself an ongoing sense of gratitude and appreciation that prompts acts of lovingkindness toward oneself and others.

V. Course Covenant

Persons in this course agree to abide by a Group Covenant. The goal of the Covenant is to establish a set of ground rules for right relationship where justice, democracy and human dignity prevail.

Essential components:

- Participation takes place "popcorn style" so that no one feels pressured to speak. We honor each other's sense of privacy.
- Share from personal experience, feelings and thoughts: We will use "I" statements and share stories from our own lives.
- No fixing: Each of us is here to take our own inner journey with group support as a community spiritual practice. We will refrain from making "fixing" suggestions to others unless invited.
- Do not gossip or tell other people's stories, both within the group and outside the group.
- Share the time and attention of the group equally and respectfully: We will listen as deeply as we share.
- Welcome silences: After someone has spoken, we will pause without filling the space with words.
- Any reference to harm to self or others, when disclosed in these groups, will be shared with the minister.
- Start on time – End on time: We honor each other's time and commitment.

Course Outline

First Class Session: The Body's Feelings

Objective: To help participants recall personal experiences when they felt joy or a deep sense of contentment.

Theological Contexts: The theology of personal experience and the seventh Unitarian Universal Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

First Practice: Connection as Spiritual Practice by the body. Method: Recall an uplifting experience.. This inner journey begins when persons recall and then share a personal experience of feeling part of something uplifting and vaster than themselves, for example, feeling part of the interdependent web of life.

Takeaway: The Pausing Exercise: A three-step process of *feeling* part of something uplifting and vaster than themselves. This process is one way persons can grow in harmony with the divine through the spiritual practice of connection.

1. Take a few moments to pause, namely, to simply stop what you are doing for 30 seconds or so.
2. Notice and discern what you felt.
3. Reflect upon what you felt and answer the following question: What did you feel and discover when you paused?

Homework: The daily practice of the three-part Pausing Exercise.

Second Class Session: The Mind's Thoughts

Objective: To help persons recall times when their minds observed their own thoughts.

Theological Contexts: The theology of personal experience and the seventh Unitarian Universal Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Second Practice: Connection as Spiritual Practice by the mind. Method: Pay attention of the transition between two thoughts. This inner journey begins when persons recall a time when they were personally aware of their thoughts without judging them.

Takeaway: The Between-Thoughts Exercise. A three-step process of *being aware without thinking*.

Homework: Practice the three-part Between-Thoughts Exercise.

1. Take a few moments to focus your attention on one thought and then a second thought. Shift your mind back and forth from one thought to the other thought.
2. Notice and discern what you were aware of between your two thoughts as your mind shifted from one thought to the other thought.
3. Reflect upon that of which you became aware.

Third Class Session: The Mind/Body Spiritual Practice of Connection

Objective: To help persons deepen their understanding and fine-tune the articulation of their own personal mind/body experiences of connection as spiritual practice ,using insights from neuroscience and various wisdom and faith traditions.

Theological Contexts: The theology of personal experience and the seventh Unitarian Universal Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Third Practice: Paying attention to, explaining, and defining the mind/body spiritual practice of connection.

Takeaway: The Between-Thoughts Exercise and the Pausing Exercise as an ongoing mind/body spiritual practice of connection.

Homework: Continue practicing the Pausing Exercise and the Between-Thoughts Exercise.

Fourth Class Session: Creating Connection as Spiritual Practice Small Groups

Objective: To help persons who want to continue connection as spiritual practice with other persons in this class to form ongoing small groups for this purpose. These groups will continue to meet to practice connection as spiritual practice.

Practice: The class will be conducted as a Love Beyond Belief™ small group check in. “Love Beyond Belief groups” is another name for “Connection as Spiritual Practice groups.”

CHECK IN EXERCISE FORMAT

1. Centering Music

George Winston - Loreta and Desiree's Bouquet - Part 2 from his solo piano album SUMMER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENXRqYixa4>

2. Centering reading calling the group together

e.g., #418 in *Singing the Living Tradition*:

Come into the circle of love and justice.

Come into the community of mercy, holiness, and health.

Come and you shall know peace and joy.

ADAPTED FROM ISRAEL ZANGWILL

3. Lighting a candle or chalice

Embodied practice: Breath meditation of slowly inhaling and exhaling at least five times (led by the facilitator) and then saying together “Thank you, breath of life.”

4. Check In: Reports on the three-part inbetween thoughts exercise and the three-part pausing exercise and further elaborations as your life unfolded during the week.

5. Second Round: Disclose how you felt as you told your story and listened to the stories of others.

6. **Check Out: What are you feeling now or what thoughts and reflections would you like to share with the group as your check out?**

7. **Extinguishing the candle or chalice**

CHECK IN EXERCISE FORMAT

1. “What do the opening rituals accomplish?” The opening rituals relax our minds, open our hearts, and center our bodies. The rituals are designed to help our souls grow in harmony with the divine through personal experiences of communal celebration. A shift within our mood or temperament occurs.¹
2. Centering music re-centers our feelings. The externally produced sound triggers internally produced movements of our feelings. These new feelings are neural re-compositions of our emotional life. The modulations of the music modulate neural patterns. A link has now been established between the “acoustic dynamics” of the music and the “emotional dynamics” triggered in our brains. The music has triggered a shift in our emotions. Discordant feelings are transformed into an experience of reassuring measure and rule within ourselves and between ourselves and others.²
3. A centering reading is a quest for truth realized. The mind now has focused attention. Distracting thoughts subside as faith and hope arise. We no longer neglect the more forceful conversation with the edges of existence, as the poet David Whyte has said: we are no longer subject to the mercies of the windblown world.³
4. Breath meditation at least five times. “When you take a **deep breath** in, **your** heart rate quickens slightly. As you exhale, **your** heart rate slows. Repeated **deep breaths** will naturally bring **your** heart rate more in sync with **your breath**. This leads **your brain** to release endorphins, which are chemicals that have a natural calming effect.”⁴
5. Check In and Check Out.

¹ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota, A Pueblo Book, 1984), 79, *passim*.

² Jaak Panksepp and Günther Bernatzky, “Emotional sounds and the brain: the neuro-affective foundations of musical appreciation,” *Behavioural Processes* 60 (2002), 150.

³ David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea as a Pilgrimage of Identity* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001). 38.

⁴ [Does Deep Breathing Really Do Anything? | Neurocore](https://www.neurocorecenters.com/blog/does-deep-breathing-really-d)
[www.neurocorecenters.com › blog › does-deep-breathing-really-d](https://www.neurocorecenters.com/blog/does-deep-breathing-really-d)

- The Art of Silence: Creating and maintaining an open space that makes room for the presence of others to be heard into speech.
- The Art of Recognition: Discovering and honoring the True Self.
- The Art of Affirmation: Paying attention to the connections between ideas and feelings, mind and body, head and heart, in order to help the group align itself as a caring and compassionate community.
- The Art of Embodied Care: Expressing one's engaged presence through authentic expressions of care and compassion such as a gentle smile that indicates attentiveness and empathy for the wellbeing of the person who is speaking.

Recommended Reading



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Healing Community

Small group ministry creates a sacred time where the stories of our lives are heard.

January 2005

By *Thandeka*

Recall a time when you were filled with joy. Where were you? At home? At a concert? A party? Maybe you were in a religious service or on vacation. Perhaps you were on a hike or seated on the sand at a beach, watching the tide roll in. Were you alone or was someone with you? Maybe you were making love, gardening, telling a joke, or jogging.

Now pay attention to how you recalled this time. You found things: memories, sensations, experiences. You gathered them together and by so doing filled a moment of time. You packed it full of thoughts and feelings, places and things, and bound them together as yours.

This recollecting and binding process is a spiritual act. It is opening up time and giving it the texture, content, feelings, and ideas actually present in your experience. This way of packing time with detail and dimension, slowing it down by filling it up with the full presence of life, is the essence of every spiritual practice.

Small group ministries are about this spiritual practice. This is why they are sweeping into so many Unitarian Universalist congregations. They aim to make moments matter again. In these gatherings of six to ten persons, usually meeting twice a month to build spiritual lives, each member holds on to the same moment through personal sharing and by asking for or by listening to the details, texture, content, feelings, and ideas packed into someone's experiences. 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.

Different congregations call small group ministries by different names--covenant groups, chalice circles, shared ministry groups, or engagement groups (in England)--but the different names refer to a common ground of experience: sacred time. The usual opening ritual for covenant group meetings calls forth this time by creating it. As the members sing a song together, light a chalice, offer a prayer, pay attention to their breath, notice the sounds in the room, hear their own heart beating, sacred time begins: the time when how we do something, the manner in which we say something, the tone of voice we use when speaking are as important as what is said.

Sacred Time

Sacred time is not the opposite of profane time. Sacred time is the opposite of fleeting time. Fleeting time is the kind of time in which we are distracted, racing around and trying to catch up as we fall further behind; it's working at the computer while a friend talks to us on the phone. By contrast, sacred time is noticing a shift of tone in a person's voice and asking what's wrong; it's full presence, paying attention in the moment. It's what happens in a covenant group when we discover how to stay present to life again.

Sacred time is biological time, the time our bodies take to act or think or feel. When we pay attention to biological time, we focus on the science and the art of spiritual practice.

Dr. Stephan Rechtschaffen, who is a physician, author, and co-founder of the Omega Institute, the largest holistic education center in the country, explores the science in his essay "Timeshifting," in *Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Juliet B. Schor and Betsy Taylor. He begins with a simple question: "Do you have enough time in your life?" Few persons in his workshops and seminars answer this question affirmatively. At a *Fortune* 100 gathering where he raised this question, Rechtschaffen reports, "not one of the one thousand persons present raised a hand to say yes." Stress is rampant.

Rechtschaffen uses two sets of exercises to help us understand his point. Try them right now: First, think of a red balloon.

Next, think of a pink elephant.

Now, pay attention to how long it took to shift from one thought to the next--a fraction of a second. Rechtschaffen's term for this split-second kind of time is "mental time."

Now try his second set of exercises: Feel sad.

Now feel angry.

Now feel rapturously in love.

How long did it take to shift? Rechtschaffen says that if the shift is much slower than with mental time, it is a sign of what he calls "emotional time." Emotional time is not quicktime thinking; it's longtime feeling. Emotional time takes so long, Rechtschaffen explains, because

feelings can't be conjured up just like that. Feelings are experienced by way of chemical communication

within the body. They are a hormonal surge, a wave that washes over us. It takes "emotional time" for them to emerge. And to adequately deal with real feelings takes more time--so, when we are rushed, it's much easier to habitually go to our mind and repress our feelings.

The mind, with its lightning-quick synapses, seems to get the job done. Feelings just get in the way--and given full rein, we fear they might pull us under and drown us. So when we pause and unpleasant feelings inevitably bob up, we bolt from them--by turning on the TV, eating sugar, making a phone call. Anything to not be in the moment.

Rechtschaffen helps us think about timeshifting as our innate human ability to alter the kind of time in which we live, simply by paying attention to the manner in which we make our way through our life. Do we navigate this moment as mental time or do we navigate this moment as emotional time?

If we resolve to pay attention to the way in which we timeshift and if we also make the commitment to enter into emotional time, then our scientific analysis of time turns into a personal practice. One benefit of this personal practice is stress reduction. Rechtschaffen explains:

Being open to and accepting of our emotions allows us to sit quietly in the present. And then we experience something quite remarkable that is key to living at ease with time: In the present moment there is no stress.

Stress comes from resisting what is actually happening in the moment--and what's usually happening is an emotion, or feeling. Our continued effort to change what is so in this moment is, in fact, the very cause of the stress we wish to avoid. Pain, either emotional or physical, may be present right now, however, it's the resistance to it that causes stress, while acceptance leads to relief. If, for example, you're going through a divorce, a job loss, a painful illness, problems with children, etc., and you don't allow yourself to feel the pain, then the suppressed pain becomes a lens through which you see all of life. And life seen like that holds little but stress.

In small group ministry this personal practice of paying attention, of experiencing stress-free moments with others, is sacred time. Small group ministries are the practice of sacred time, which is why they are transforming our religious landscape.

Congregations Transformed

Five years ago, few churches had small group ministry programs. There has been no formal survey, but anecdotal evidence that reaches me in my role as co-president, with the Rev. Michael McGee, of the Center for Community Values indicates that at least 70 percent of our churches now have them or are making plans. Small group ministries are revitalizing the spiritual life of our congregations.

Small group ministries can affirm and care for congregants in new ways and inspire visitors to return. Often, pledging goes up and volunteer work expands. The groups can help equip people to create and sustain relational communities where justice, democracy, and human dignity prevail. They can work wonders and transform lives.

These groups usually meet in participants' homes, following a simple two-hour format of an embodied practice such as listening to the sounds in the room or listening to the sound of one's own breath or

heartbeat, a check-in, discussion, a check-out, and a closing ritual. In addition, groups often work on community service projects at least once or twice a year.

The Rev. Bob Hill, the UUA's Southwest district executive, characterizes these groups in *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry* (Skinner House, 2003) as "saving the world ten at a time." The Rev. Calvin Dame, one of the early Unitarian Universalist leaders in this movement, is now president of the UU Small Group Ministry Network, an independent affiliate of the UUA. The Center for Community Values is a nonprofit organization that encourages the development of small relational groups in UU churches, in other faith traditions, and in business and other secular settings. All of us are spreading the word: Small group ministries heal and transform lives.

The Science

Small group ministries begin with a biological fact: Our bodies matter. They are the way we experience sacred time. I learned this hard lesson several years ago when I accidentally slammed a door on my finger. My finger pulsed with excruciating pain. I did everything I could to ignore the pain. But I was with a friend who, unknowingly, had walked around on a broken leg for three years because her doctors had mistakenly assumed that the source of the problem was elsewhere. So my friend had to learn how to deal with pain--all the time--until her leg injury was, finally, surgically corrected. Now, my friend saw me trying to pay attention to everything except the pain and she said, "Stop."

"Pay attention to the pain," she said. "Concentrate your entire attention on the pain because your body is trying to tell you something. It's signaling distress. Danger. Your body is telling you to get out of harm's way. The pain will decrease as your attention to it increases. Your body wants to make certain you have received the message."

I stopped everything I was doing, gave up all the distractions, and concentrated full attention on the pain so that my body would be fully satisfied that I had received its message of distress. As I did this, quite to my surprise, the pain began to subside. My finger still hurt, but not as much as before because I now felt the rest of me. I was fully present in this moment. My finger was now part of my full life again, and my whole life was wider than this immediate pain. As I discovered and then entered this difference between the immediate pain and the rest of my life, my stress level was reduced. This is why small group ministry dissolves stress. In our groups, we pay attention to aching souls. And the attention is healing.

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 feelings. 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.

Neurologist Antonio Damasio, in his book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, calls the source of this feeling of life itself our "background feeling," our sustaining mood that carries us through the ebbs and flows of our life. Here timeshifting ends. We no longer reflect; we experience. We no longer observe; we are.

We are more than our thoughts. We are more than our ideas. We are alive.

The Theology

Fifty years ago, the composer John Cage, wanting to experience absolute silence, entered a small, six-walled, echoless chamber constructed with special soundproofing materials to eliminate all external sound. Once inside the chamber, Cage, quite to his surprise, heard two sounds: one was high pitched, the other was lower. Afterwards, the engineers who constructed the chamber told Cage what he heard: the sound of his own nervous system in operation and the sound of his own blood circulating.

This experience led Cage to conclude, "Until I die, there will be sounds." But Cage went on to draw a second, less obvious conclusion. These sounds, he concluded, "will continue following my death." Cage had discovered a sustaining power that was more than himself alone.

While he was in the chamber, he felt the floor and his shoes and the skin on his feet as they met and altered the pattern of his nervous system. He saw color. The color of the walls and the light patterns in the room altered his retinas and thus his nervous system. He felt the air in the room enter his lungs. The quality and temperature of the air in the room affected his breathing and thus the flow of his blood. He felt all of these things and more.

The two sounds he heard were not only the sounds of his nervous system and blood. Cage heard the way he--all of him--and the world met.

In reflecting upon his experience, Cage described this infinite feeling of being stirred by life itself as a revelation of the universe. His ostensible turn inward had led him into the very heart of the world. Here's how he put it: "One sees that humanity and nature, not separate, are in this world together; that nothing was lost when everything was given away. In fact, everything is gained."

Two hundred years ago, the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, recognized today as the father of modern liberal theology, used strikingly similar words to describe this "basic feeling for the infinite" in his book *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* :

Observe yourselves with unceasing effort. Detach all that is not yourself, always proceed with ever-sharper sense, and the more you fade from yourself, the clearer will the universe stand forth before you, the more splendidly will you be recompensed for the horror of self-annihilation through the feeling of the infinite.

In Schleiermacher's view, the human foundation of this "feeling for the infinite" is a physical feeling. Each shift of feeling within us is an amplification of the way the world alters us. This shift, this felt sense of being altered by life itself, is the binding principle of our lives, the sustaining power of our life.

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh invented the word "interbeing" to describe the structure of this binding principle of our lives. In any and every human experience, he tells us in *The Heart of Understanding* , everything is present. Just think of the paper on which his words appear, he suggests. Really look and you will see everything there.

Your mind is in here and mine is also. You cannot point to one thing that is not here--time, space, the earth,

the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. "To be" is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be.

"This sheet of paper is," Nhat Hanh concludes, "because everything else is."

The human experience of interbeing is our experience of an incarnational moment of the universe, as the Rev. David Bumbaugh, my colleague at Meadville Lombard Theological School, has described it. In Bumbaugh's words, we Unitarian Universalists find the "universe continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing." Following from this view, revelation is the lover's tease, the rush of life through us as we, lovers of life, unite.

For Good Reason

So why do we need small group ministries? Why can't we do this work by ourselves? Because it takes a village to sustain a soul. I use an extreme example to make this small point. The story is recounted by psychoanalyst R. D. Laing during his work with a catatonic schizophrenic patient.

Each day, as Laing made his rounds, he would sit next to the immobile man and say something like: "If my mother had locked me in a closet for all of those years, I wouldn't want to talk to anyone either."

Day in and day out, Laing made such statements to the man and then would move on to his next patient.

And then the day came. Laing sat next to the man, told him he would not want to speak to anyone either, if he had been treated the way this man had been treated by his mother. And the man turned to him and said, "Yeah."

The man had heard another person say to him "You are sad and for good reason." This man had been left alone for so long that his feelings and thoughts had been gutted of content. He had become an abstraction of time, an experience without thoughts, feelings, or an inner life because no one was there with him; no one was there who cared.

In covenant groups, members say to each other, "I am lonely and for good reason," and the group is there with them and says, "Yeah."

Someone says, "I feel sad and for good reason." And the group is there with them and says, "Yeah."

Someone else says, "I need more love, more compassionate engagement, more attentive care--and for good reason." And the group says, "Yeah."

So if someone tells you that she or he knows pain, loneliness, loss, fear, and dismay, but does not know the feeling of being sustained by a love that is wider, deeper, and infinitely vaster than the sorrows, hear those words as a commission.

Hear your commission to love, to create community, and to heal. One at a time in personal relationships, ten at a time in covenant groups, hundreds at a time in our congregations, hundreds of thousands at a time in our religious movement, millions at a time as we take our commission deeper and deeper into humanity's heart as a justice-loving people who will transform the world.

This is the Good News of our faith. The power that sustains our faith turns our small group ministries into spiritual practices that can heal and transform the world.



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