

## **The Sources of Our Faith**

### **I. Spiritual Experience**

#### **Chalice Lighting**

#### **Sharing of Joys and Sorrows**

**Silence, holding ourselves and each other in silent support.**

#### **Shared Reading:**

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

\* Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

\* Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;

\* Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

\* Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

\* Humanist teaching which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

\* Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature

#### **Deep Sharing/Deep Listening**

#### **Group Business**

#### **Closing Words and Song "Go Now in Peace"**

### **The Covenant**

I commit myself:

- to come to meetings when I possibly can, knowing that my presence is important to the group.
- to honor the group by letting the leader know if I will be absent and to come to the group one last time and say goodbye if I need to quit.
- to share with the leader the responsibility for good group process by watching how much time I take to speak and noticing what is going on for others.
- to not gossip about what is shared in the group, and not tell other people's stories.
- to listen to what others share with an open heart, and to share deeply in my turn.

## Deep Sharing/Deep Listening

During this time, one person speaks at a time, into an appreciative silence. The only response to the speaker is non-verbal, although the leader may express thanks if that seems comfortable. There is a brief moment of silence between speakers so that we can let the sharing “sink in.” Then the next person will share. This may seem awkward or unsupportive at first, but most groups find it very satisfying once they get used to it.

The one who is sharing has the job of speaking deeply from their heart about the topic at hand. Listeners have the task of keeping an open heart to what is shared. The next speaker has the task of leaving some space before they speak. The leader is responsible for helping speakers remember the time frame they have to speak in.

The speaking may go in any order. It is assumed that everyone in the group will speak, but if someone does not want to speak, they may pass.

In a second “round” everyone who wishes to add second thoughts or thoughts sparked by what was shared may do so. It is not appropriate to ask questions about what someone else shared, only to reflect on what the sharing sparked in oneself. Once again, there should be a bit of silence between speakers.

If everyone has had a chance to speak a second time and there is time remaining, there may be a more conversational time. Those who are speaking should be aware of whether others wish to speak. Once again, the focus should be on what you are thinking and feeling, rather than probing others or attempting to solve problems for them.

## *Covenant Groups*

## **Direct Experience**



## ***Leader's Notes for Spiritual Experiences***

Light the chalice using words of your choosing. Remind your group that the Sharing of Joys and Concerns is an opportunity for each person to EITHER contribute a one-word description of how they are feeling at the moment, OR to share something that presses on them, good or bad, which they want the group to know. If someone is absent, they will (hopefully) have called you and you can share the reason for their absence in the group.

Give your group the gift of three minutes of silence. Time it!

Read the six sources around the circle.

Then begin your sharing. Let each person in your group share either a spiritual experience they have had, or, if they can't think of an experience they would call spiritual, a "high point" or "peak experience" of their life.

Some of these stories will probably be very tender, and they may bring tears. You will want to convey to your group a wordless acceptance and appreciation of whatever happens. You should respond to everyone who shares with a "thank you for sharing." If it seems necessary to say more, you might say something about how precious these memories are.

If there is time for a second round of sharing, remind your group that the purpose of the second round is for those who wish to add something they forgot or to make an observation about what was shared. We don't question others in our group...that reduces the sense of safety. If there is time for general conversation, you can invite that.

There will probably not be any group business this time, so you can move right into your closing circle. As people take hands, share, in your own words, an appreciation of what has just happened, along these lines. "This evening we have shared memories which are sacred to us; peak experiences, mystical insights, our sense of the presence of God. Let's just stand a moment and remember what we have brought, and what others have brought. (silence)

Sing Go Now in Peace.

Pass out homework for next meeting.

## Homework: Direct Experience of Mystery and Wonder

Whatever we believe, the direct experience of Mystery and Wonder is a foundation of our spiritual lives. These experiences are common and come to most people, but they are not honored in our culture and therefore we often forget them, put them aside, or don't talk about them. This session will be devoted to remembering and sharing some of our "direct experiences." Give yourself a few days to dredge up some of these memories, and make a few notes so that you will remember.

(Religious experience) is natural and common to most of us, at least once in awhile. We are struck dumb by massive shafts of sunlight breaking through dark thunder clouds, falling on the desert. A sleeping child on our lap makes us completely still and fills us with utter peace. In a moment of extreme suffering something opens up and we somehow know that even though everything is "wrong," everything is really all right; a confrontation by someone who loves us leads us to quiet, deep, honest surrender. In one way or another, we find our way into stillness, quiet, a full emptiness; we open to a place within that is truthful, grounded, humble, and utterly real. Brian Taylor, *Becoming Christ*

Mysticism is where religions start. Moses with his flocks in Midian, Buddha under the Bo tree, Jesus up to his knees in the waters of Jordan, each of them is responding to something of which words like Shalom, Oneness, God, even are only pallid souvenirs... Religions start, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat—to put it mildly—or with a bush going up in flames, a rain of flowers, a dove coming down out of the sky. "I have seen things," the medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, told a friend, "that make all my writings seem like straw." Most people have also seen such things. Through some moment of beauty or pain, some sudden turning of their lives, most of them have caught glimmers at least of what the saints are blinded by. Only then, unlike the saints, they tend to go as though nothing has happened. —Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*

In spontaneously occurring unitive experiences, one feels suddenly "swept up" by life, "caught" in a suspended moment where time seems to stand still and awareness peaks. One becomes, at once, totally awake and open. Everything in the immediate environment is experienced with awesome clarity, and the vast panorama of consciousness lies open. For the duration of the experience—which is usually not long—mental activity seems to be suspended. Preoccupations, misgivings, worries, and desires all seem to evaporate, leaving everything "perfect, just as it is."...Toward the end of the experience, feelings such as awe, wonder, expansiveness, freedom, warmth, love, and a sense of total truth or "rightness." After the experience is over, there is an almost invariable recollection of having been "at one." Gerald May, *Will and Spirit*.

As you read these passages, do you remember some similar experiences you have had? Perhaps out in nature, perhaps a sudden realization or a coincidence so improbable that you were startled out of taking the world for granted? When do you feel you have been in the presence of the Holy? When have you been awed, or moved to tears? What have been your experiences of profound peace or at-one-ment?

If none of this rings any bells with you, think about high points and peak experiences of your life.