

## 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 avoid cross talk, giving feedback or trying to fix anyone
- 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.



*Connections*

# Connections

## **Chalice Lighting**

O light of life,  
Be kindled again in our hearts  
As we meet together this morning  
To celebrate the joy of human community  
Seeking a wholeness that extends beyond ourselves.  
~*Samuel A. Trumbore*

## **Introductions**

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

## **Group Business**

## **Shared Readings:**

We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness....  
~*Thich Nhat Hanh*

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.  
~*Marianne Williamson*

Listening is such a simple act. It requires us to be present, and that takes practice, but we don't have to do anything else. We don't have to advise, or coach, or sound wise. We just have to be willing to sit there and listen. ~*Margaret J. Wheatley*

Only through our connectedness to others can we really know and enhance the self. And only through working on the self can we begin to enhance our connectedness to others.  
~*Harriet Goldhor Lerner*

Know how to listen, and you will profit even from those who talk badly. ~*Plutarch*

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.  
~*William Shakespeare*

## **Deep Sharing/Deep Listening**

Introduction to Deep Sharing/Deep Listening

Round I  
Brainstorm a sentence or two about what you need to be open with new people.

Round II  
Share what you learned about yourself from the homework on the topics of connections and listening. Feel free to refer to your tree and/or answers to your questions.

Round III  
In this session, did you discover anything new about what links are important in your life? What has been especially meaningful to you?

## **Closing Words**

We cannot hold a torch to light another's path without brightening our own. ~*Ben Sweetland*

## **Song "Go Now in Peace"**

## **Group Business**

Pass out homework for the next session.

## Leader's Notes for Connections

### Beginning Activity: (5 min)

As participants enter, give each an index card and a pen to make a name tag with the following information:

Center: The name you wish to be called during meetings

Upper Left: A group that is important to you

Upper Right: An activity that makes you feel connected

Lower Left: A place that means a lot to you

Lower Right: A person such as a musician, author, poet, social activist, or scientist whose work has meaning for you.

### Chalice Lighting: (2 min)

Ask someone to read the chalice lighting reading found in the bulletin.

### Introductions: (5 min)

Ask group members to introduce themselves using the information written on their name tags.

### Silence: (3 min)

Introduce the time of silence with words such as, *"Let us enjoy a few minutes of silence as we let go of the details of everyday life so that we may enter a more contemplative space."*

Give your group the gift of three minutes of silence.

### Group Business: (10 min)

Tell them how glad you are they are in the group and how much you're looking forward to getting to know them.

- Each meeting will last an hour and a half to two hours and will be centered on a certain topic. The topic for the next meeting will be given out at the end of the meeting.
- Tell them where the bathroom is.
- Usually any business is handled at the end of the meeting – and is quite brief. Today it is early in the meeting and will be longer since we're just beginning.
- Look at covenant in the bulletin. Let's read it. Ask one person to read the first item. Ask the group: Any comments or problems? Can we all agree to this? Continue through all items of the Covenant.

### Shared Readings: (3 min)

Go around your group, letting each person in turn read from Shared Readings found in the bulletin until all readings are finished.

## **Introduce Deep Sharing/Deep Listening: (10 min)**

Read the following words from Thich Nhat Hanh:

*We have begun to learn about a method of deep listening. As we already know, we have to practice before we can listen deeply. Sometimes we can also translate "deep listening" as compassionate listening, that is, to listen with compassion, or to listen with love. We hear with one aim only; we don't listen in order to criticize, to blame, to correct the person who is speaking or to condemn the person. We only listen with one aim, and that is to relieve the suffering of the one we are listening to. We have to sit still, we have to sit with inner freedom, and we have to be one hundred percent present, body and mind, listening so the other can relieve his or her suffering. If we can sit for an hour, that is a golden hour. That hour is an hour which can heal and transform.*

Tell about the process in your own words. Tell the group that the deep sharing/deep listening is the core of the covenant group. It is a unique way of sharing and listening, so spend a few minutes acquainting the group with the process. Mention that for some deep listening is initially uncomfortable because many of us feel compelled to respond with advice and support. Then do your rounds of deep sharing/deep listening. Pay close attention to the time allotted each person to ensure all get to share at least once.

### **Round I (5 min)**

Brainstorm a sentence or two about what you need to be open with new people.

### **Round II (40 min)**

Share what you learned about yourself from the homework on the topics of connections and listening. Feel free to refer to your tree and/or answers to your questions.

### **Round III (15 min)**

In this session, did you discover anything new about what links are important in your life? What has been especially meaningful to you?

### **Closing Words: (1 min)**

Read the words in the bulletin.

### **Song: (1 min)**

*Go Now in Peace*

### **Group Business: (3 min)**

Give out homework for next time. Preview homework with the group by going over it. Tell them: Read over the homework, then respond to the questions you are drawn to. There is lots of material here; it is intended to give you fertile ground for thinking about this subject. You don't need to answer every question, and you may wish to add your own ideas on the topic.

Ask if group members are ok with sharing the roster with one another.

## Connections

We come into this world alone, but from that moment on, our lives become a web of connections. Some of our early ties stay with us throughout life, deepening and growing. Others change or fade with time. Some are broken abruptly. We also forge new bonds. These connections are often with people and groups, but we also connect with ideas, art, nature, animals, science and whatever else touches us deeply. We grow and change and are enriched by our links to that which is outside of us. The stories we tell about ourselves include some of the connections we have made throughout our lives. One way to get to know each other and ourselves is to talk about these bonds.

The formation of new connections requires that we be present for others. Just as we do not really notice the trees dancing in the wind if our minds are busy with everyday details, we cannot hear what another person is saying if we are busy rehearsing our story or thinking of a reply. In Covenant Groups we learn to listen with an open heart and not with a mind full of advice, judgment, and additions to other peoples' stories. As we learn to receive others' stories, we also learn to share ours. When we are listened to in an environment of acceptance and confidentiality, we begin to let others enter our worlds. Through this process we deepen our understanding of both ourselves and others which is sometimes the beginning of new and meaningful connections.

Below are some quotations that might expand your thinking about connections and about listening. As in all Covenant Group lessons, the quotations are provided to stimulate thought, not to provide answers or limit your reflections.

**We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as results. ~Herman Melville**

Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. ~Thomas Merton

**When we are with Nature we are awake, and we discover many interesting things and reach many a mark we are not aiming at. ~John Muir**

Cherish your human connections: your relationships with friends and family. Eventually everything connects - people, ideas, objects. The quality of the connections is the key to quality per se. ~Charles Eames

**Creativity is the power to connect the seemingly unconnected." ~William Plomer.**

At different states in our lives, the signs of love may vary: dependence, attraction, contentment, worry, loyalty, grief, but at the heart, the source is always the same. Human beings have the rare capacity to connect with each other, against all odds. ~Unknown

**We know from science that nothing in the universe exists as an isolated or independent entity. ~Margaret J. Wheatley**

The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen. Together, our vision widens and strength is renewed. ~Mark Morrison-Reed

**To listen is to continually give up all expectation and to give our attention, completely and freshly, to what is before us, not really knowing what we will hear or what that will mean. In the practice of our days, to listen is to lean in, softly, with a willingness to be changed by what we hear. ~Mark Nepo**

We listen to each other.

We set aside our own opinions for a time as we try to understand another's.

We listen to seek in the other the truths reflected there that have no words.

True listening involves a setting aside of the self, a total acceptance of the other.

Sensing this acceptance, the speaker will feel less and less vulnerable and more and more inclined to open up the inner recesses of his or her mind to the listener.

As this happens, speaker and listener begin to appreciate each other more and more.

~Unknown

**I want to remind us all that the world is listening, all the time. How we are ripples out from us into the world and affects others. We have a responsibility-an ability to respond-to the world. Finding our particular way of living this responsibility, of offering who we are to the world, is why we are here. We are called because the world needs us to embody the meaning in our lives. God needs us awake. The world we live in is a co-creation, a manifestation of individual consciousness woven into a collective dream. How we are with each other as individuals, as groups, as nations and tribes is what shapes that dream. ~Oriah Mountain Dreamer**

Although your sharing at the meeting may be spontaneous, it is often helpful to think about what you are going to say ahead of time. To get your thinking started, draw a tree with yourself as the trunk and what you feel connected to in life as the roots, branches, and leaves. Now consider these questions that may help you prepare to share at the Covenant Group Meeting. You may skip any that do not resonate with you, and you may add other thoughts you have about the topics of connections and listening.

1. What does "*connection*" mean for you? Give some examples.
2. What were your earliest connections? Which are still meaningful to you? Which have you gradually grown away from? Which were broken suddenly? Do you miss any connections from the past or are you glad to have severed them?
3. What connections are now most important in your life? How do you nurture those connections?
4. What connections would you like to deepen? How would you deepen them if you could? What new connections would you like to make?
5. Do you remember a time when you wanted to connect with someone and it was impossible? What do you think prevented the connection?
6. How is listening related to connecting for you?
7. Are you generally a good listener? Do you get impatient when you listen to others? If so, why? If not, why not? What makes you listen deeply to another person?
8. Do you usually feel listened to? What types of listening allow you to open up and speak of your deepest thoughts?