

Taking It Home: Families and Faith

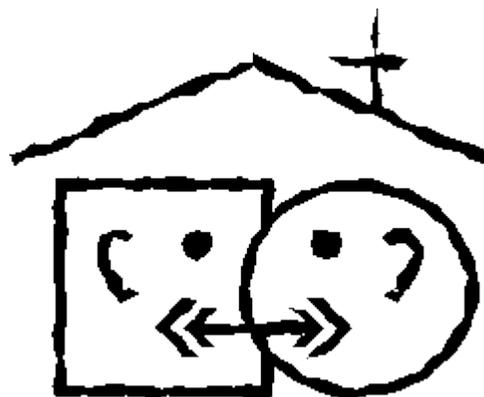
Tools for Deepening Your Faith at Home

Let's Talk About Marriage and Committed Relationships

by Pat Hoertdoerfer and Lynn Ungar

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Marriage is one of the most remarkable and most courageous of human acts, the promise of two human beings to share life together on all levels --physical, economic, spiritual --a promise made in the face of the certainty of death, the certainty of change, and the uncertainty of everything else. There is nothing else quite like this act, nothing so foolish, nothing so profound.

--From the UU wedding of Douglas Neff & Corey Rothermel

*Love one another, but make not a bond of love:
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls...*

*But let there be spaces in your togetherness,
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.
Love one another, but make not a bond of love.*
--Kahlil Gibran

How can we tell if our union is a marriage from the heart? To be sure there are signs--just-because gifts, jokes told through eye contact or a quiet touch at exactly the right moment. . . . Partners in this healthy mode seem tenderly amazed by one another. They have an immense respect for one another and an instinctual sense of kindness.

--Lois Kellerman, *Marriage From the Heart*



How to Use This Guide

At different times in history, people with entirely contrary views of marriage lived literally side-by-side under different marriage rules. So you have Jews allowing divorce and Christians forbidding it; Jews allowing an uncle and niece to marry, while Christians forbade you to marry your godmother's third cousin. I'm not exaggerating! Or you have the English aristocracy saying you could never legitimate a child born before a marriage, while the village juries agreed that a child born after trothplight (engagement) but before the wedding ceremony was legitimate and could inherit. So the history of marriage is the history of debate and change and disagreement.

--E. J. Graff, quoted in *UU World*

Marriage covenant is seen not simply as a social arrangement or a legal bond or even a personal commitment, but rather, and most significantly, as a holy "covenant" in which God is an active partner.

--Don Gillies, *Passion and Freedom*

A liberal religious ideal for contemporary marriage has three core elements: (1) A lifelong commitment, the container from which the rest of the good things about marriage flow. (2) A relationship of equal regard, defined as "mutual respect, affection, practical assistance, and justice--a relationship that values and aids the self and other with equal seriousness." (3) A relationship with both private and public privileges and responsibilities to families and families to their communities.

--William Doherty, quoted in *UU World*

This booklet and others in the *Taking it Home: Families and Faith* series provide Unitarian Universalist congregations with resources to promote intergenerational interchange and responsibility in their programs and to support faith development and dialogue with families at home. This booklet can be used as a catalyst for conversations in couples' discussions, couples' groups, youth groups, all-congregation retreats, and leadership training events.

Marriage can be a complex and difficult topic for people to discuss. We carry value judgments, past history and cultural assumptions of which we may not even be aware. What's more, families have different preferred styles of dealing with important rites of passage. Some find that *casual conversations* offer surprising insights into their family members' deepest thoughts. Others enjoy creating a family ritual one evening a week, when they can focus together on important events in their lives and share in a *structured activity*. Still others may want to *gather with a group of families in their congregation*, building a sense of community as they explore this topic together. If yours is a casual-conversations family, you will find throughout this booklet questions titled ***What Do You Think?*** These questions can be used to spark fresh thoughts on this topic and to launch conversations at mealtimes or bedtimes; in the car or on a walk; or even while shopping or watching television. In your conversations, or as you ponder your own answers, listen for statements of personal values around work, leisure, spiritual practice, and family time. Anecdotes

of choices made, whether perceived as good or bad choices, will offer insight, as will "should" statements. The phrase **Try This** accompanies many of these questions and introduces an activity that will help make the concepts more concrete. For structured activities that build on each other from week to week, turn to the section titled [Activities](#). These suggestions can be used at home or with intergenerational groups in your congregation.

How to Begin

Read through the two essays that follow-[What is a Marriage/Committed Relationship?](#) and [Marriage and Unitarian Universalist Faith](#)-and note what thoughts, images, and experiences they bring to mind. [Committed Relationships Across the Lifespan](#) examines the stages of committed relationships. The information and practical suggestions offered here will help you focus on elements that are most appropriate for your family across the lifespan. The [Activities](#) section provides exercises for scheduled times together as a family or with a couples group or an intergenerational group in your congregation. [Resources](#) lists books and web sites, keyed to different ages, which will take your family's exploration of time and money resources even deeper. At the end of the booklet, you will find the [Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes](#) and the [Principles in Language for Children](#). The concluding paragraphs offer additional information about the [Taking It Home](#) series.

What is a Marriage/Committed Relationship?

How do we live our religious values in our most intimate relationships? How do we express our belief in the dignity of every human being in day-to-day interaction with a spouse? What does it mean to practice justice, equity and compassion in a partnership? Complex questions that need to be answered by each couple and each partner in that committed relationship. But perhaps there are some guidelines that can be helpful.

It is inspirational to think that the principles UUs aspire to in relationship are reflected in our UUA Principles and Purposes and also strongly confirmed by research as contributing to the success and longevity of marriage. And when we think of the times we have felt most loved or most loving, that experience reaches deep into our hearts and souls. All of us can remember a time when someone engaged us in an experience, an understanding, an insight that changed our lives. Lifetime relationships deepen, expand, and change lives enormously.

If the first step of marriage is to nurture unconditional love, the second step is to cultivate hope, and the third step is to be faithful. Faith in marriage is confidence in the loving culture that has been developed in a shared home life. This culture includes spiritual practices, shared memories, promises kept, and hope endured. Over time this special culture becomes a third component to our covenant. We have a commitment to ourselves, to our partner, and to the marriage/relationship we have created together.

Today we know a good deal about what makes a marriage work, emotionally and functionally. We know some things about what makes a partnership work spiritually. And we know a lot about the developmental tasks that marriages go through at different stages of the relationship and of life. We know a lot less about the success of committed relationships that are not formalized by marriage vows. This guide assumes the same principles apply no matter what the sexual

orientation of the partners if the couple's commitment is comparable to that of marriage. This booklet is an attempt to combine the principles of our faith and the knowledge we have from research on successful marriages as a guide for committed relationships.

What Defines a Successful Relationship?

Difficult question! There are probably as many answers as there are couples and individuals in partnerships.

Here's an attempt to answer that question with some defining characteristics: First, the relationship survives and does not end in divorce. That eliminates about half of all marriages. But that criterion is not sufficient. A second valid criterion is that both partners identify themselves not only as individuals but also as a couple. And the third criterion is that both partners believe that this is a rewarding and fulfilling relationship that nurtures their own spirit, identity, emotional core, and well-being.

***What Do You Think?** What about your marriage? Is it nourishing to you, emotionally, physically, spiritually? What do you appreciate most about your partner that enriches your life? How are you and your partner good for each other? Where does your relationship need improvement?*

***Try This:** Sit down with your partner and finish each of the statements below. When you are finished, take turns reading a statement aloud to your partner, and then listening to her/his version. When you have finished reading through all your statements, reflect on what you have learned from your partner, what surprised you, and what you need to talk about in greater depth.*

- (1) I just love it when you _____.*
- (2) Something you have helped me learn about myself is _____.*
- (3) What helps us grow closer is _____.*
- (4) One thing that I regret having done is _____.*
- (5) One thing I have always wanted to talk more about is _____.*

Choice

*Since what we choose is what we are,
and what we love we yet shall be,
the goal may ever shine afar-
the will to win it makes us free.*

#374 *Singing the Living Tradition*

Marriage involves a bold choice. People choose their partners beyond all others to make them the focus of their strongest desires for romance, friendship, erotic and spiritual companionship. They choose to belong to each other, to become "us"-a new relational and family entity that carries profound social, legal, and even political implications.

The unique story of a couple--their *Story of Us*--is their own personal sacred history. Learning to tell their shared story to each other and to others is fundamental to their shared spirit as a couple.

What Do You Think? *When and how did you meet your partner? How did you grow into love? Who proposed marriage or covenanting? Whose story outside your own family of origin inspires your own life partnership?*

Change Is!

The one constant in marriages and in long-term relationships is that things change. Life changes. Stresses change. Children change. Our bodies change. We change. And the marriage changes. And one of the most accurate words to describe a new marriage (or any intimate relationship) is *change*. Change is the way of all things. For many people the ongoing flow of life constitutes god itself-Christians call this life force the Holy Spirit; Hebrews refer to it as *nashoma*; yogis use the word *prana*; Chinese say *chi*.

Change makes way for new knowledge and experience: We deepen our relationship when we marry; we deepen it further when we buy a house or have children or face challenges together. Every day and month and year a couple has opportunities to learn and grow. Some of the most obvious changes include:

- change in lifestyle
- change in location
- change in friends
- differences of opinion
- changes in personality
- change in appearance and health
- different expectations
- having children

What Do You Think? *Are you faithful to commitments you make to your partner, so that you can rely on one another when all else fails? Are you open to new resources to help you to get through life's joys and sorrows? Do you have a regular way of sharing hope with others through the challenges as well as the joys of life?*

Spirituality and Relationship

What does it mean to say that a relationship nourishes one spiritually? Spirituality is a personal thing. It can be a straightforward spiritual practice or a subtle intuition. It may reside within another area of life, such as political involvement, artistic expression, or family solidarity. In a meaningful marriage, partners can find fulfillment by supporting and accompanying one another on their spiritual journey.

It is a challenge to make a marriage work when values, in particular religious values, differ. Such a relationship can work if there is agreement on the important standards that guide every-day living, like commitment, honesty, sharing, respect, loving, and forgiveness. But there is no question that commonality of religious values can strengthen the bonds of intimacy and differences in belief systems can create barriers that require special efforts to overcome. Research supports that similarity of values is an important aspect of long-term relationships. And people who have shared a similar spiritual pathway may enhance their chances of a successful relationship.

What Do You Think? Do you and your partner share similar or different spiritual pathways? Where do your values and religious beliefs differ? How do you live your values with each other?

Couple Interaction

But what is this psychic space, this common ground we seek to share, called intimacy--this place where you can exist in your own inner light and not be judged, this haven where your vulnerabilities don't humiliate you, where sex is always warm and close and all your funny lines are understood, and there is always someone back to back with you when you take on the world?

--Merle Shain

Being mindful...leads to the formation of stable, satisfying relationships.

--John Gottman

Perhaps the most intensive research on successful relationships has been focused on how couples interact with one another. Or, how do we treat each other?

First, there is no such thing as a committed partnership without conflict. Despite all our romantic dreams, conflict is a given. How conflict is managed matters. In fact, most marriage therapists focus on how conflict is resolved.

But one researcher (Gottman) has convincing evidence to demonstrate that it is how you respond in the *rest* of your relationship that makes the biggest difference to the success of a coupleship, and the biggest difference in how you survive conflict. He maintains that:

1. The positive exchanges in your relationship build up a reserve bank account of goodwill, warmth, love, and intimacy between you. When conflicts, occur they draw down the reserve of goodwill, but hopefully there's enough left to live on. If the bank account gets

into a negative balance, the relationship goes bankrupt. In other words, there has to be a surplus of positive exchanges over negative exchanges for a relationship to survive.

2. Every partner makes bids for connection--for love, for attention, for interaction, for problem solving, for intimacy. And every partner makes choices about how to respond to the other partner's bids. Those choices are: to *turn toward* the other ("I agree." "Can we talk about that?"); to *turn away* (No response, or looking away and making a totally unrelated statement.); or to *turn against* ("So what do we have to talk about *now*?" "Right--it's always my fault!"). Interestingly, and not so intuitively obvious, the scenario where one or both partners *turn away* from the other tends to create the most rapid pathway to divorce. Partners who employ *turning against* tactics often stay together longer, but most eventually go their separate ways.¹

Disagreements and conflict occur in all relationships. However, it is possible to turn *toward* your partner and still maintain your position. And humor can often take the sting out of angry comments. But contempt, criticism, ignoring, and withdrawal are relationship killers. (Gottman) The qualities that save marriages, that enhance relationships are the "turning toward" reactions. Think of the couples that you admire, that seem to live their love. Notice how often they look, touch, laugh, admire, and engage each other. Marriages made in heaven require daily work on the ground.

What Do You Think? *What memories do you have to go back to that created and cemented the bond between you and your partner? How do you argue? Where can you give yourselves credit and demerits? Think of a time when you resolved a tough conflict well. Reflect on the steps you and your partner took to resolve the conflict and repair your relationship. Discuss these steps with your partner.*

Try This: *Reflect on the ways you and your partner tend to "turn toward," "turn away," and "turn against" each other. Name the patterns of choosing and patterns of behavior that led to deeper commitments in your relationship. Talk with your partner about the ways you will remain faithful to your marital commitments.*

Commitments in a Successful Marriage

Lois Kellerman in her book *Marriage from the Heart* describes right commitments of a spiritually healthy marriage. These commitments--centering, choosing, honoring, caring, abiding, repairing, listening, and celebrating--are equally valuable tools for many different temperaments, unique partnerships, individual circumstances, and phases of life.

"What's good in your marriage comes from the promise that you've already kept" states Kellerman--"the promises to honor each other, to laugh together, to stand by each other in good times and bad." The eight commitments that Kellerman defines can give your marriage further grounding, connection, and resiliency. The Eight Commitments are defined below and followed by questions for you to explore as you reflect on your own committed journey. In the [Activities](#) section there are many exercises to try at home and to try in your congregation as you work on sustaining, maintaining, and creating your successful marriage/relationship.

FIRST COMMITMENT

Centering: I will create a warm, loving home and place my marriage at its center.

SECOND COMMITMENT

Choosing: I will cultivate the discipline of choosing wisely.

THIRD COMMITMENT

Honoring: I will have reverence for my partner and myself.

FOURTH COMMITMENT

Caring: I will be a source of loving care for my partner, setting my heart upon what matters most.

FIFTH COMMITMENT

Abiding: I will have faith, patiently persisting through life's many changes.

SIXTH COMMITMENT

Repairing: I will work to mend what is broken in my partner and myself.

SEVENTH COMMITMENT

Listening: I will stay open to new insight, however unlikely the source.

EIGHTH COMMITMENT

Celebrating: I will celebrate spiritual values with my partner and others.²

A Note on Lesbian and Gay Relationships

There is not a lot of research on the success of long-term gay and lesbian relationships. But some good assumptions can be made. There is good reason to believe that the principles of successful heterosexual relationships largely apply to gays and lesbians in committed relationships as well. On the down side, the continued bias, discrimination, and hostility experienced by the gay community must add increased stress to individual partnerships. On the positive side, there may be some advantage to being in a same-gender committed relationship. There has been a lot of press about how men and women relate differently (e.g., Men are from Mars, etc.). Some early research suggests that similar communication patterns may contribute to long-term gay and lesbian relationships. Masters & Johnson demonstrated long ago that same-sex partners understood each other's sexual desires on an instinctive basis much better than heterosexual partners did.

In the current era an open issue is how much formal marriage adds to or changes the success of homosexual committed relationships. It is well known that heterosexual couples who choose to live together and subsequently marry have a *higher* divorce rate than those who move in together

after marriage. Here we are back to the defining characteristic of commitment. Living together can mean "let's see how it works out" or a whole lot more. Commitment is what it means to the two people involved, but probably, in marriage or out, level of commitment is a highly relevant factor.

Marriage and Unitarian Universalist Faith

As a UU I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

As a UU I affirm justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

--UUA Principles and Purposes

The bonds of marriage are woven into a web fashioned of love but of many kinds of love: romantic love first, then a growing devotion and the blending of these into a loving companionship.

It is made of loyalties, and interdependencies, and shared experiences. It is woven of memories of meetings and conflicts--of triumphs and disappointments. It is a web of communication, a common language, and the acceptance of silences too, knowledge of likes and dislikes, of habits and reactions, both physical and mental. It is a web of known and unknown exchanges.

The web of marriage is made in day-by-day living side by side. It is woven in space and in time of the substance of life itself. Into this estate of marriage, made holy by the sacredness of existence, these two persons come now to be joined.

--Rev. Robert Senghas

Respect is love in plain clothes, someone once said, and so are acceptance and understanding and really being known. And when someone really understands what makes you who you are, they've made a friend for life.

--Merle Shain, *Courage My Love*

We make a leap of faith when we commit to another human being--faith in this person's capacity to love, to believe in us, to be trustworthy, to share the trials and tribulations of life. But that's not all--we make a leap of faith in ourselves--in our own ability to love, to care when we are angry, to make choices daily with the awareness of the impact on our relationship, to love when promises are broken and feelings are bruised. We have to acknowledge wrongdoings, reach out to make amends, and honor our commitments to change. A shared vision - even a shared spiritual vision - of what we want in life and what we want in this special relationship can help see us through the bumps and bruises of marriage.

What we truly believe, about life, about morality, about what matters in life can help us remain persistent in the face of inevitable disappointments and obstacles in a relationship. But a loving relationship, a sense of facing the world together, of growing in maturity and spirit because of the understanding, nurturing, and love from each other also affirms our belief in life and in what

truly matters in life.

Unitarian Universalist Marriage Ceremony

When two people decide to formally join their lives together, creating a family unit out of their individual lives, they have, over centuries of human history, celebrated and formalized that relationship through having a wedding ceremony. The words and actions we choose for these important rites of passage say a great deal about what is most precious to us. It is not surprising that the movement to recognize marriage for same-sex couples has become a significant civil rights movement in recent years. After all, the notion that loving, committed relationships should be recognized by communities, and not just individuals, is found in cultures all over the world and throughout millennia. Although the form of marriage ceremonies can vary wildly, the ways we publicly declare and celebrate our most central relationships help to define who we are-how we see ourselves and how we wish to be seen.

For Unitarian Universalists, with our tradition of ongoing search and seeking wisdom from a variety of sources, a wedding is an opportunity to craft a ceremony that reflects the particular personalities and beliefs of the couple being married. (Note: the terms "wedding" and "marriage" are used to refer to both legal marriages and non-legal ceremonies for same-sex couples.) While some UU couples choose to use traditional ceremonies, such as that from the Book of Common Prayer, more often they will use traditional (or not-so-traditional) elements of a wedding ceremony, but with words tailored to express what is most important to them. The parts of a UU wedding ceremony reveal how our faith tradition regards marriage.

Opening Words

Most UU wedding ceremonies begin with some words from the minister (or other officiate) addressed to both the couple and the guests. This is an opportunity to name what a wedding does and its significance in the life of both the couple and the community. Often, these words will acknowledge both the unique and independent lives of the two people who are marrying, and the need for patience and compromise as these two people continually develop the third entity which is their relationship. Although the connection to our UU principles will probably not be made explicit, you are likely to find in these opening words a reflection of both our UU principle of respect for the "inherent worth and dignity of every person" and our third principle of "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth."

These opening words might sound something like:

Dear family and friends, we gather today for the marriage of Jill and Dexter. This day is truly a special one, as they stand before their beloved community to declare their commitment to a love strong enough for a lifetime. They stand before you prepared to enter into a new beginning, ready to celebrate the rite of passage that marks their entrance into married life. But this beginning is, of course, only the continued unfolding of two lives with full and rich histories of their own, of two pasts filled with joy and sorrow, love and learning. Marriage is neither an endpoint of their individual journeys nor a mere marker on the way. It is a doorway that they choose to step through together, not knowing where this new road may take them, but sure that they are ready to travel this path together.

Dexter and Jill, today you take upon yourselves the potential of a love already real between you. You have shared much, and you have chosen to enter into a covenant built of sharing. It is no

casual thing to have entered into the inmost life of another person. To make the commitment of love is to risk the pain of grief, the possibility of loss. You are both mature people with your own established patterns of living. Yet you have found not only a need for companionship, but also the satisfaction of that need in each other's company. You stand together, evidence of the free choice that each of you has made to place your lives in each other's hands. As you walk through this doorway of marriage, you promise each other neither perfection nor peace, but rather your dedication to the ongoing process of declaring faith in each other, trusting both who you are and who you yet will be.

Resolve that your love will not be blurred by the commonplace, nor shadowed by the difficulties of life. Offer yourselves to each other, but remember that you can only give that priceless gift by remaining firmly rooted in the knowledge of who you each are--two strong individuals of grace and complexity and beauty. Sacrifice for each other, and compromise with each other, but never sacrifice or compromise the essential truth of who you are, for it is the integrity of your two souls on which this marriage is founded. It is with great love for each of you, and great joy that you have found each other, that all of us gather here with you, Jill and Dexter, to celebrate the choice you have made to journey together.

Statement of Intention

Either directly before the vows or near the beginning of the ceremony, couples are often asked to state their readiness and clear intention to be married. In some ways this can seem strange. After all, why would all these people be gathered, with a big cake sitting in the hall, if the couple wasn't intending to be married. However, the statement of intention highlights a crucial aspect of the wedding ceremony. UUs believe that marriage is to be undertaken only as a clear and deliberate choice. It is not something casual, a sort of "let's try it and see." It is not to be coercive, undertaken to please family or society. To be a true marriage, the choice needs to come from the hearts-and minds-of two people who have given the decision a great deal of consideration and know that they are truly ready to commit to building a life together.

One simple statement of intention would be:

Joyce and Debra, you have invited us to witness the happiness that you have found with each other. Are you now prepared to enter into this covenant of love? "We are."

Community Blessing

In some UU weddings the couple will choose to have a formal part of the ceremony to acknowledge the importance of the community gathered to celebrate their union. A wedding is not, in fact, a private matter between two people. The formation of a family unit (whether or not it will include children) affects all those who participate in the life of that family. Parents, siblings, friends, members of a church or other community-all are touched by the choice of someone they love to be married. This part of the ceremony might honor parents by presenting them with roses or asking them to light candles, or could include asking all the family members of the couple to come forward to give their blessing.

Sometimes, as in this example, the entire gathered community is honored and asked to pledge their support to the couple:

It is important, even vital, that all of you are here to participate in this wedding. You are here not simply as guests at a party, but rather as witnesses to a sacred covenant. You, their

community, are the vessel that holds the love that William and Joseph bear for one another. From you, their family and friends, they have learned what love means, what it is to care for another across all the years and through all the events that life can bring. They pledge today to share that kind of faithful love with one another through all the years of their lives. However, their love and their lives exist within a context, within the circle of our love for the two of them. They will need to turn to you to share with you the sorrows that are too deep for only two hearts to bear, and joys too expansive for only two hearts to contain. And so it is that I ask, do you, the family and friends of Joseph and William, honor their choice to marry and pledge them your support and acceptance? If so, I ask that you respond with "We do."

Honoring Children

Sometimes one or both of the people being married already have children, either from a previous relationship or from within their own relationship. If marriage is seen as the creation and/or acknowledgment of a family unit, it only makes sense that the children who belong to that family be honored as part of the ceremony. A wedding can be an important opportunity to ceremonially acknowledge that while a child's family dynamic may have changed through divorce and remarriage, that child will always be an important part of each parent's family. The power of ritual can also be significant in declaring to children that the step-parent relationship is a vital and loving one.

Here, the child of the groom is welcomed into her new family:

When two people come together to be wed it creates more than a marriage, it creates a family. A precious part of Jason and Jenny's family is Jason's daughter, Julie. We all know that family can be a complicated thing, and the large number of us whose parents are married to people other than our parents know just how complicated it can be to stretch the bonds of our closest love outward to create wider families than what we have known before. It's complicated, but it's possible. The miracle of love is that, unlike, say, peanut butter, love doesn't get any thinner when you spread it farther. Jason has come before us today to declare his love and devotion to Jenny, but his love and devotion to Julie continue as strong and true as ever. The only thing that has changed is that now Jenny, too, formally commits herself in the devoted love of family to Julie. Julie, would you please now come forward to receive the gift that Jason and Jenny would like to offer you as a symbol of their continuing love.

Readings

UUs have been accused, on occasion, of believing in "salvation by bibliography." Certainly, part of our tradition is the belief that there are many sources of wisdom, and that we have much to learn by paying attention not only to the sacred books of humanity, but also to the poets and other writers who share with us the best of what is human.

There are vast numbers of readings that UUs have chosen to speak for them in their wedding ceremonies. Here is one from the 19th century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker:

It takes years to marry completely two hearts, even of the most loving and well-assorted. A happy wedlock is a long falling in love. Young persons think love belongs only to the brown-haired and crimson-cheeked. So it does for its beginning. But the golden marriage is a part of love which the Bridal day knows nothing of.

A perfect and complete marriage, where wedlock is everything you could ask and the ideal of

marriage becomes action, is not common, perhaps as rare as perfect personal beauty. Men and women (two people) are married fractionally, now a small fraction, then a large fraction. Very few are married totally, and they only after some forty or fifty years of gradual approach and experiment.

Such a large and sweet fruit is a complete marriage that it needs a long summer to ripen in, and then a long winter to mellow and season it. But a real, happy marriage of love and judgment between a noble man and woman (and today, I would broaden that to include two men or two women), is one of the things so very handsome that if the sun were, as the Greek poets fabled, a God, he might stop the world and hold it still now and then in order to look all day long on some example thereof, and feast his eyes on such a spectacle.³

Vows

The vows are the heart of the wedding ceremony, the covenant that the couple makes with one another. A wedding is, essentially, a promise made by two people, given social (and, in some cases, legal) standing by the fact that this promise is made in front of witnesses. It is not surprising that most UUs choose to write their own vows, carefully crafting the words of covenant that they will say to one another. After all, our tradition is one that puts heavy emphasis both on the power of the word and on the need for individuals to seek and speak the truth as they understand it. When a UU couple chooses to take the significant step of joining their lives in marriage, it only makes sense that they would want to choose the exact commitment that they are making.

It is worth noting that the promises that a couple make to each other in their vows are not necessarily ones that they will be able to keep at every moment of every day. The fact that they have vowed to "cherish" one another doesn't exclude the very likely possibility that each will find the other exceedingly annoying on occasion. However, the covenant that they make with each other stands both as a statement of their highest aspirations and as a commitment that they must try their best to keep. If, for instance, Mary and Jo promise to "honor our differences," then Mary is entitled to remind Jo of that commitment in the midst of an argument over whether they will vacation in a comfy resort or a wilderness retreat that can only be reached by means of a 25-mile hike. It is a Jewish tradition for couples to hang the wedding vows, or *ketubah*, on the wall of their home, where it can serve as a reminder of the covenant they have made with one another.

That said, there is not really any such thing as "typical" vows for a UU wedding. Here, however, is one example:

Linda/Anthony, you are my home, my family, my companion, and my collaborator. With delight in who you are, and trust in who you are becoming, I promise to honor your life choices and support your creative endeavors. I will listen openly and speak honestly, respecting our differences and cherishing all we share. I will comfort you in sorrow and celebrate with you in joy. I offer you passion and persistence, intimacy and independence, laughter and love. Whatever the world may bring us, I take you as my partner through all of my life.

Rings

Wedding rings serve as a visible and enduring symbol of the commitment of marriage. They serve as an announcement to the wider world that the wearer is married and as a tangible reminder of the vows that have been made.

As with other parts of a UU wedding, there is no single set of "right" words. In many cases, as in this one, the minister offers an understanding of the meaning of the rings before asking each member of the couple to place the ring on his/her beloved's finger while repeating some final words of covenant:

The circle is the symbol of the sun and the earth and universe, of holiness and perfection and peace. In these rings it is the symbol of the unity in which your two lives are now joined in one unbroken circle, in which, wherever you go, you will always return into the circle of one another's arms.

As you place the ring on Mary's/Jo's finger, please repeat: "Wear this ring as a symbol of my love."

Prayer

UUs have many different attitudes toward prayer, and it is far from a given that a UU couple will choose to have a prayer as part of their ceremony. However, many couples do choose to have a blessing of their relationship and/or a time of silent reflection. Some couples, particularly those with more intimate ceremonies, may even ask for spoken blessings from those in attendance.

Spirit of Life and of Love, may Andrew and Duane live lives richly blessed by love. May they know in their bodies the passion that sparks and burns in mutual allure. May they know in their hearts the glow of shared compassion and respect and caring. And may they know in their hands the light of love turned outward in acts of caring and justice in a world that is always longing to be made anew. In this time of silence I invite you to offer your own silent prayers and good wishes for Duane and Andrew. (Silence) So may it be. Amen.

Pronouncement

The pronouncement is the official declaration that the ceremony is complete, and the couple well and truly married. Although a pronouncement is traditionally given as a kind of legal stamp, "by the powers invested" in the minister of church and state, UU weddings may acknowledge that the true power and authority to create a marriage comes from the couple themselves, and the community that holds their relationship.

For as much as you have chosen each other from the many of this earth, and have declared your love and purpose this day, we have heard you promise to share your lives in marriage. It is not a minister standing before you that will make your marriage real, but the honesty and sincerity of what you have said and done here before your family and your friends. On behalf of our free faith and the many people who know and love you, I declare that you are husband and wife. May all honor your decision and the threshold of your house.

What Do You Think? *If you are married, what were your wedding vows? Could you recite them now? If not, you may wish to find them and remind yourself of what you have promised.*

If you are married, how do you feel about the vows you made? If you were writing your vows today, what would you want to add in or take out?

***Try This:** Pose these questions to yourself: What covenants other than marriage do you have in your life? Do you have implicit or explicit covenants with your children? Your friends? Your workplace? Your church? Compare and contrast these covenants.*

***Try This:** Both marriage and the UU tradition seek to balance individuality and community, the needs of the individual and the needs of the whole. Are you comfortable with this balance in your life? Could your life or relationship use extra attention given to your personal needs or to the needs of the marriage/family/community? Discuss this balance with your partner.*

Committed Relationships Across the Lifespan

The Stages of Committed Relationships

There are well-identified stages of marriage. And each stage incorporates a challenge to be experienced. Think of where you are in your relationship. What stages have you experienced?

The first stage of young marriage is to establish a **coupleship** that has a separate existence from one's family of origin. This is easy for some and very hard for others. A "primary relationship" means primary. It requires a priority over the long-established bond with one's parents. And parents can make this developmental step easy or hard. Parents do not disappear from one's life, but the boundary is important.

The family or community in which we grow up give us expectations of what "normal" looks like. In choosing a partner, people take a risk, venturing into the unknown of someone else's reality. And much conflict comes from honest efforts to assist partners in becoming more in understanding of her/his reality.

New discoveries will continue throughout a lifetime! Maybe they won't discover until more than a decade into the marriage that one partner sees the dining-room table as a good place for kids to do their homework, while the other knows that tables are only for eating. Even after many decades together, partners can stumble over differences of opinion about how a partner ought to behave after a major health crisis or how retirement pensions should be saved or spent. Observe your lives or chosen families and discover alternative realities.

Try This: Complete the Family Culture exercise. When you are finished, compare and discuss responses with your partner.

Family Culture Exercise⁴

In my family culture...

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. Expression of anger was strongly | discouraged ___ encouraged. |
| 2. Expression of affection was strongly | discouraged ___ encouraged. |
| 3. Loving physical contact and closeness were | uncommon ___ common. |
| 4. Communication was | closed ___ open. |
| 5. The ability of my parents to resolve conflict was | excellent ___ poor. |
| 6. Discipline was | harsh or unfair ___ fair. |
| 7. Family activities or celebrations were | few ___ frequent. |
| 8. Some of my family's values were _____ | |
| 9. Some of my family's tradition were _____ | |
| 10. Our most important celebrations were _____ | |

As the coupleship endures throughout the years of marriage, partners navigate many **life cycle transitions**. Common transitions are listed below to help couples understand possible issues that may arise. In paying attention to these transitions, couples can find ways to mark the passage-by taking extra time together, by taking a special holiday, by engaging in renewing or healing ritual-in healthy and empowering ways.

Common life cycle transitions may include:

1. Romantic enchantment

2. Marriage ceremony

3. If partners become parents
 - children born or welcomed

 - children start school

 - children grow into adolescents and then young adults

 - children leave home

4. Empty Nest: Partners' needs here can differ or their roles may even reverse.
5. Retirement: In the "new world of work," this transition can occur several times.
6. Care for aging parents: This stage can occur anywhere in this cycle. For some couples it is a distant responsibility and for others it may include a multi-generational household.
7. Growing old together: Partners face health issues and need new kinds of support and care.
8. Death of one partner: The surviving partner learns a new way of living.

For nearly half of American couples, the life cycle changes with separation and divorce. While former partners will not live through these transitions as a couple, they will continue to be influenced by many of these changes in their relationship--their children's growth and needs, the death of the children's grandparents, and the eventual death of a former partner.

***Try This:** Are you are facing life cycle transitions now? Set aside some time to reflect on these changes. Use the following exercise to discern the gifts of memory and imagination in your partnership. Write your thoughts in your journal and share your responses with your partner.*

Gift of Memory

1. *When we were first a couple, we wanted to change (affect) the world by _____.*
2. *We have discovered other dreams and priorities in our life together _____.*
3. *How I feel about these evolving priorities _____.*

Gift of Imagination

1. *Our greatest gifts as a couple _____.*
2. *What we still want to do in the world _____.*
3. *Practical steps we could take to continue being the kind of people we dream of being _____.*

And the arrival of **children** is a major change. Everyone who has been through this stage understands that life turns upside-down. And hardly anyone anticipates this impact ahead of time. Parents can do a great job of co-parenting. But the big risk here is that the children will drain the energy and nurturing out of the couple's relationship. In three generations we've gone from an adult-centered society ("children should be seen and not heard") to a child-centered society. Everyone wants the best for their children--and providing a child the best preparation in a highly competitive society requires a lot! It's easy to ignore, to "turn away" from, one's own needs and one's partner's needs in the enthusiasm of providing attention, love, confidence, and education for children.

Here's a time to return to a discussion of values--what's a healthy balance between our needs and our children's needs? What are we sacrificing that we might regret? Will we have enough in our

emotional bank account to survive, even flourish when they're gone? When do their needs clearly come first? When do we need to tend to the maintenance of our marriage?

***Try This:** How do we balance child-rearing and our own marriage? Do our children see us as in a loving relationship they might want to emulate? After reflecting on these questions, ask your children to discuss promises and covenants with you. In a wedding the couple makes promises to each other about how they will be together. What promises would you make about how you will be with your family? What promises would you want your parents or siblings to make to you?*

Many married people wear a ring as a symbol of the importance of their love for each other. Do your children have anything they wear or keep that is a symbol of something important to them? (Some examples might be a chalice necklace or pin, girl scout patches or boy scout badges, a certificate for some accomplishment, etc.)

Children change too. And their changes make an impact on the relationship. Normal adolescence is tough on parents--and a risk factor for their marriage. A seriously ill child is an enormous stress on relationships. Incorporating stepchildren into a new marriage is a multiple challenge. People do succeed in these challenges, but the marriage is changed.

***Try This:** Using your journal, create a HOPE CHEST that you can count on during hard times. Take a few moments and jot down times you felt hopeful and times you did not. Search your past for memories of joy. Include things you have always longed to do. Include times when your partner stood by you or treated you especially well. These entries will be your HOPE CHEST. Read and reread them when times are difficult to remind yourself that you can count on this partner who loves you.*

A developmental issue for all **long-term relationships** is that of the balance between independence and togetherness, or interdependence. For most people in successful relationships there is a "you," an "I," and a "we." The relationship itself has an identity. A major question for today's couples is "which of these takes priority?" We honor the independence of each individual. But there are many times when a value choice arises which takes precedence: What's good for you? What's good for me? Or what's good for us? Every stage or phase of partnership requires adaptations in behavior and shifts in agenda. It is as though your marriage covers six, seven, or eight different covenants, and you are never sure when one ends and another begins. Marriage is always about growing and learning and bringing out the best in each other through all the variety of experiences that life offers.

Most couples find a balance between independence and interdependence, between togetherness and separateness, between sacrifice to the needs of the partner or the relationship and an insistence on independent identity and choices. But it is an ongoing negotiation and changes throughout the life of the partnership.

Try This: Complete the following Growth and Change Checklist. Reflect on the areas of your relationship in which you would like to change and grow in new ways. Share your checklist with your partner. Are there areas you would like to work on together and/or areas you might need help addressing?

Life Change and Growth Checklist⁵

Statement	0 not an issue	1	2	3	4	5 major concern
I wish we paid more attention to the spiritual side of our relationship.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I would like our sex life to be more satisfying.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I wish we had more romance in our relationship.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I want more fun in our life together.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I wish we could manage our finances better.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I would like my partner to share more of the work.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I would like my relationship with our children to improve.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I would like my partner's relationship with our children to improve.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I want to improve my relationship with our families.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I wish my partner's relationship with our families would improve.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I wish we could learn to fight more openly or constructively.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I wish we could do some new things together.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Another important stage and challenge of marriage and committed relationships is the task of creating a joyful and mutually satisfying **sexual relationship**. Some people are fortunate enough to maintain a passionate relationship throughout the course of their union. But for most it is an area of discovery, negotiation, compromise, and hopefully satisfaction. Lovemaking can be a very significant bond in marriage. When it becomes a major source of conflict, it can be torture. It can be crucial to the happiness of one couple and insignificant in the scheme of what's important for another. Lovemaking can be a ritual of spiritual dimensions for some, or a

necessary, fun-filled pure release of libido and tension for others. It is hardly ever a ho-hum topic. And it is a crucial developmental task in a relationship.

In this complicated arena, perhaps one guideline would be helpful: There is a parallel between lovemaking and success in resolving conflict. Just as successful resolution of conflict depends on all the positive exchanges that occurred between two people in the hours and days and weeks before the argument, so lovemaking never begins when two people get into bed. It starts days before in the engagement, fun, support, and affection that has been exchanged between two people. In marriages, in relationships, and in building emotional connections, love and "turning toward" works.

Try This: Follow this Lovers' Workout to build and/or tune-up your relationship. Try inventing your own Extreme Lovers' Workout.

Lovers' Workout

- *Morning: Take three minutes each to learn one thing that is happening in your beloved's life today.*
- *Daily Check-in: Take 20 minutes for a conversation at the end of the workday to share the ups and downs of the day. Catch up on each other's plans and hopes. Conclude this time by naming at least two things you appreciate and want to encourage in each other.*
- *Hug your partner at least twice a day!*
- *Kiss, hold, cuddle each other every day.*
- **Weekly date:** *Set aside 1-3 hours every week to be together with your beloved exclusively. Do something fun and special to reconnect and cherish each other.*

There are other stages, other challenges. **Second marriages** bring their own challenges. The "empty nest" is a well-known stage. Illness brings changes to a marriage. **Aging** changes a relationship. Like ourselves, our own bodies, our own identities, a relationship is never static.

What Do You Think? Ask yourselves: *What stages of our relationship have we mastered? How did we do that? What one are we in the middle of? How are we doing? Is there one stage that continues to be a thorn in our sides over many years? How are we at discussing these issues? How do we each see our own balancing act between independence and interdependence? Separateness and togetherness? How similar or different are our values on this issue?*

What Do You Think? *How successful have we been in creating a mutually satisfying sexual relationship? Do we really know each other? How important is sex currently in our relationship? Historically?*

Try This: *What major stresses have we been through that have forged bonds in our relationship? Are there some that have threatened those bonds? If this is a second marriage, how does the ghost of the first marriage influence us? If or when appropriate, list the stresses/challenges and then list the commitments and values that have strengthened your relationship.*

Try This: *How has our relationship changed over the years? 10, 20, 40 years? How have our values and spiritual beliefs influenced how we live our relationship? Write a Love Letter to your partner articulating the values and commitments that have sustained your relationship over the years.*

Activities

The previous sections have suggested ways for you to engage with your partner and/or family around the meanings of marriage and the stages of your ever-evolving relationship. Now you may be ready to bring your family together to talk and share your thoughts and feelings. This section offers suggestions for family activities first at home and then in your congregation.



Let these suggestions inspire your own creativity and curiosity, build on them and adapt them for your particular needs. Let the needs, dreams, and values of **your** family be your guide.

At Home

Timelines: Partners are to make a timeline of their lives side by side. Go from birth to today and mark the milestones along the way. You can break up your life into eras or make separate timelines for your lives before you met. Choose a medium for your timeline:

- Newsprint with markers
- Posterboard with pins and labels
- Computer-generated document
- Yellow legal pad

Include the turning points in your lives-moves, changes in schools/workplaces, births and deaths, ends and beginnings. After your initial timeline drawing, step back and look at the major changes. Reflect and respond to the following questions:

- Where did you have choices in these changes? Where not?
- Where do the lines of your love life converge? Where do they move apart?
- Is there a clear story?
- How have you shared your story with family and friends?
- As you ponder your future life story, what are your choices? Where are they leading you? What changes do you want to make?

Reconnection: Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see each other whole against the sky.

--Rainer Maria Rilke

When you are feeling disconnected, how do you get back to respecting and honoring your partner? Discover some preventive strategies by asking your partner the following questions:

1. To find out how you can be most supportive when things heat up, ask what time-out signals are needed to break the tension. Devise your own secret code or hand signals or one-liners to make an angry lover stop/step back/laugh.
2. Make sure your partner knows how you like to be soothed when you're upset. Do you need time alone? Do you need a steady verbal reminder of how important you are to your partner? How does your partner like to be soothed?

Discover also some in-the-eye-of-the-storm strategies to regain connection. Talk about the following strategies as possible avenues for reconnection:

- Humor is a natural force that calls us to wholeness. You can dismantle a bad mood with a small joke, an exaggerated pantomime, and a silly sound. Try it.

- Appreciate your spouse in spite of his/her opposing viewpoint. Remind yourself that your partner enriches your worldview simply by having her/his own opinion.
- Look outside the partnership for guidance. Good advice can come from your mother, your pastor, or a wise older friend but it doesn't always come from predictable sources. Ask for help.

Thank you Love Note: On your anniversary or on your birthday, take some quiet time to write a list of your "thanks" to your beloved. Read through your list and determine the "gifts" you prize the most. Take the top three gifts and write a paragraph on each gift and how that gift reflects your highest values. When you have finished, read your love note to your partner and discuss it.

A rendition of this exercise can be a couple's thank you love note to their parents that can be shared during the marriage ceremony. Another rendition of this activity can be a couple's thank you love note to their children/stepchildren that can be shared during the marriage ceremony celebrating the new blended family.

Growing Apart: Every relationship has highs and lows. However, if the lows predominate, a couple will likely grow apart and find other people, places, and things to sustain them as individuals. There are often warning signs, especially around issues of depression, substance addiction, and interpersonal violence, and these situations call for professional attention. These warning signs may lead to serious problems. One or both partners may seek professional help—minister, counselor, therapist—at such times. Reflect on the following questions and discuss your responses with an appropriate person—your partner, minister, counselor—to deal with your situation.

1. What are some of your partner's current stresses?
2. What are some of my major worries?
3. Do you feel sad or miserable for extended periods of time?
4. Does your partner feel anxious or more irritable than usual when you go out of the house on your own?
5. Has your professional work or family life suffered because of your drinking?
6. Has your partner put the purchase of drugs ahead of financial responsibility?

7. Do you withhold approval or continually criticize your partner?

8. Does your partner insult you or threaten to hurt you?

Depression (questions 3-4), substance dependency (questions 5-6), and abuse (questions 7-8) are debilitating habits/behaviors that need to be addressed by professional help.

Celebration: Seeking lifelong love and partnership commits a couple to joy in the deepest sense. Reflect on the times and experiences of joy in your partnership by completing the following statements and then sharing them with your partner.

1. Things I especially enjoy doing with my partner_____.

2. Expressions of affection I enjoy receiving_____.

3. What especially lifts my spirits and gives me joy_____.

4. My partner would give me great joy if he/she would_____.

5. With my beloved, I have felt sexual and spiritual ecstasy. My description of this time
_____.



In the Congregation

Many of the ideas suggested in the **Try This** and **Family Activities** can be modified for use in your congregation's programming. Identify a facilitator for these activities and encourage him/her to adapt the activities to fit the needs of your congregation.

Roots, Values, and Vision: Encourage a diversity of couples-young/old, gay/straight, different ethnicities, interfaith-to gather for this workshop. Bring paper and pencil to this workshop. When people are seated, light your chalice and read #436 in Singing the Living Tradition hymnal. After introductions and welcome, ask couples to write the story of their roots. Invite each partner to record his/her responses to the following three questions:

- What were your parents' or your family of origin's individual and shared values?

- If you grew up with two parents, what was their vision of their marriage?
- How do you hope to be like or unlike them?

After 10 minutes, invite partners to share their "roots" story. After five minutes, ask couples to form small groups of four to six persons and share with one another their "roots" stories. Bring the whole group together after 15 minutes.

Invite couples to sit face-to-face and complete the *Where Do My Values Come From?* exercise.

Where Do My Values Come From?⁶

Put a check mark beside all the statements you agree with. Then go back over your answers and try to identify the major influence that helped form each. Write down the major influence beside each statement you agree with, choosing from the following:

- FT: Family or parents' teaching
- FE: Family or parents' experience or example
- S: Society's messages (media, etc.)
- P: Principles from my faith
- F: Friend's experience
- T: Teacher's teaching or example
- E: Your own experience

Our marriage is	Influence
1. Forever	_____
2. An adventure	_____
3. Hard work	_____
4. Both a joy and a challenge	_____
5. Other: _____	_____

Religion/Faith is	Influence
6. A source of comfort	_____
7. Inspiring	_____
8. A good practice	_____
9. A source of challenge	_____
10. Other: _____	_____

Money is	Influence
11. To be spent	_____
12. To be saved	_____
13. Security	_____
14. To be shared	_____
15. Other: _____	_____

Education is	Influence
16. Exciting and stimulating	_____
17. For job preparation	_____
18. Lifelong	_____
19. Hope for the world's future	_____
20. Other: _____	_____

Sex is	Influence
21. An expression of love	_____
22. A force	_____
23. Fun	_____
24. Spiritual	_____

Share and discuss the completed exercise with your partner. Discuss where you differ and why. How can you deal with the differences in your life together?

After a short break, invite couples together in a circle with paper and pencil. Ask them to write their "Vision of Partnership" by completing the following statements.

- As partners, I would like us to be _____.
- As lovers, I would like us to be with each other _____.
- As parents, I want our children to experience us as _____.
- The values and principles I want to see reflected in our marriage are _____.
- As members of the human family, I want us to make the world better by _____.

After 10 minutes, invite partners to share their visions with one another. After five minutes, ask couples to form new small groups of four to six persons and share their visions of partnership with one another. Bring the whole group together after 15 minutes and invite participants to share ways that their values and visions reflect their UU faith. Close with a song (*Singing the Living Tradition* #402 From You I Receive or #395 Sing and Rejoice).

Couple Dialogue: Again encourage a diversity of couples to participate in this activity/workshop. When all participants have gathered, talk about the importance of communication in creating, maintaining, and sustaining a committed relationship. Read #488 Hold Fast to Dreams from *Singing the Living Tradition* to center participants and to focus them for the following activity. Invite them to take some deep breaths and to reflect on the following questions:

- What model of marriage/whose story of marriage inspires your life partnership?
- What do you dream of for your union?

Invite participants to write on their papers any notes to themselves in response to the previous questions. Then ask them to complete the statements in *Couple Dialogue* exercise.

Couple Dialogue

Complete each of the statements below. When you're finished, take turns reading a statement aloud to your partner and then listening to your partner's statement. Go back and forth, alternating between taking the lead and really listening to your partner without comment.

1. A peak experience in our relationship was _____.
2. I just love it when you _____.
3. Something you have helped me learn about myself is _____.
4. What helps us to grow closer is _____.
5. Something I find difficult about you that we seldom talk about is _____.
6. An important issue between us right now is _____.
7. It really makes me mad or hurts me when you _____.
8. One thing I have always wanted to talk more about is _____.
9. Physical affection is best for me when _____.
10. I dream that together we could _____.

After you have read through all the statements, reflect on what you have learned from your partner, what surprised you, and what you need to discuss in further depth. Risk being as fully open as you can. Engage in dialogue with your partner about your reflections and experiences of this activity.

After couples have finished their dialogues, invite them back into the whole group. Ask for volunteers to share their experiences of this activity and any new insights they gained. Close with a song (*Singing the Living Tradition* #368 Now Let Us Sing or #402 From You I Receive).

"Fighting Fair" Conflict Management: Conflict is an inevitable part of relationships, but the goal is to engage in healthy conflict that leads to growth and change. Conflict has been defined as two or more ideas/resources/values in the same place at the same time. It reminds us that something important is happening in the relationship.

Encourage a diversity of couples who know one another to participate in this workshop. Invite them to bring troublesome issues and/or recognizable conflict situations from their years together

to the workshop experience. When people have gathered, light your chalice and read #468 We Need One Another from *Singing the Living Tradition*. After some introductory comments on relational conflict, invite couples to reflect silently on conflict in their relationship. For their silent reflection, ask the following questions:

- Who makes the decisions in your relationship when it comes to:
 - Financial investment?
 - Major household purchases?
 - Family vacations?
 - Holiday celebrations?
 - Interior decoration?

- What happens when you face times of conflict? Any patterns of behavior?

Invite couples to share any responses to the questions with one another. After 5 minutes, ask for volunteer couple(s) to role-play a conflict. Choose slightly over-the-top but recognizable conflicts (money, sex, housework, time together, disciplining children).

Before role-playing a conflict situation go over the Fighting Fair Rules with examples from your own experience.

Fighting Fair Rules:

- Soften your startup-rather than blaming, begin by gently sharing how you feel.

- Say "I" rather than "you."

- Listen carefully and generously, acknowledging your partner's feelings and reflecting back what you understand.

- Address specific behavior rather than personality traits or other generalities.

- When tension builds, monitor your own stress level and take a 20-minute break when necessary.
- Commit to being kind and respectful of your partner's differences and struggles.
- Learn to compromise and work toward a mutual "yes."

Invite comments on these "rules" from couples. Then ask couples to come up with two or three *Fighting Fair Rules* that really work for them. After 10 minutes, invite every couple to share their rules with the whole group.

Then ask for volunteers to role-play a conflict situation. Give the following instructions: First, ask the role-playing couple to define the conflict and identify the problem. Second, they are to share their conflicting feelings. Then stop the role-play and ask everyone to brainstorm solutions. Then ask the role-playing couple to choose a solution and bring the role-play scene to a conclusion. If there is interest, role-play two or three conflict situations.

Engage couples in the exercise, *Naming Your Assumptions*. After the topic is given, ask couples to each take two minutes to state their assumptions on it. After each topic, invite couples to reflect on their differences and common ground, surprises and tensions. Topics for them to compare their assumptions on are:

- Credit
- Retirement
- Fidelity
- Child rearing
- Savings
- Vacations
- Health

With any time remaining, invite couples to reflect on the Fighting Fair Rules and what "rules" they will take home with them. Invite their concluding comments on the experience and process

of this workshop. Close with a song (*Singing the Living Tradition* #402 From You I Receive or #413 Go Now In Peace).

Eight Commitments Workshop Series: Engage a group of diverse couples in a series of workshops based on the Eight Commitments. Kellerman's book includes discussion questions and activities at the end of each chapter. To help you get started, download the Leaders Guide from the UUA Families Website (www.uua.org/families/rite_passage/marriage).

Your congregation may offer a number of courses and discussion groups of interest and help to married couples/families. Work with your minister, religious educator, or lifespan religious education committee to bring them into your congregation's programming. Here are a few suggestions:

- *Building Your Own Theology: Introduction and Building Your Own Theology: Exploring* by Richard S. Gilbert are six-session programs for adults to explore personal theology in a group setting.
- *Premarital Counseling Guide for Same Gender Couples* is a four-session program for same gender couples. (www.uua.org/obgltc/resource/pmcgsgc)
- *Parent Trilogy* and *Parents as Spiritual Guides* are programs for couples with children to explore family values and family heritage in a group setting.
- *Life Tapestry: An Exploration of Adult Life Issues* by Marcia Bowen, Jeanne Nieuwejaar, and Richard Stower is a nine-session program for adults to explore life issues, such as intimacy, aging, loss and grief and others. This program is out of print but may be available in a local congregation's library, district RE library, or UUA LFD Loan Library.

Footnotes

1. Gottman, John. *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1999.
2. Kellerman, Lois. *Marriage from the Heart; Eight Commitments of a Spiritually Fulfilling Life Together*. New York, Penguin, 2002.
3. Seaburg, Carl (editor). *Great Occasions Readings for the Celebration of Birth, Coming-of-Age, Marriage and Death*, 113.

4. adapted from activity in *Passion and Freedom* by United Church of Canada
5. Adapted from an activity in *Passion and Freedom* by United Church of Canada.
6. Composite activity from various pre-marital courses of Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Canada sources.

Resources

Adult

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- Doherty, William. *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*. New York: Guilford Press, 2003.
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- *Life Tapestry: An Exploration of Adult Life Issues*. Bowen, Nieuwejarr, and Stower. Unitarian Universalist Association, 1994. Out of print but available in local congregation's library, district RE library, or UUA LFD Loan Library.

Videos

- Better Than Chocolate (Trimark, 1999) 101 minutes.
- When a Man Loves a Woman (Touchstone, 1994) 125 minutes.

Web Sites

- www.uua.org/families and www.uua.org/obgltc/resource/pmcgsgc UU marriage resources
- www.smartmarriages.com, The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education
- www.wwme.org Worldwide Marriage Encounter
- www.marriageequality.org/ Marriage Equality USA
- www.marriages.org Marriage Encounter Home

Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes

We, the member congregations of the UUA, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations

- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part

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 spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men that 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 that call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves
- Humanist teachings that counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions that celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature

Grateful for the religious pluralism that enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations, we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

From the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association

Principles in Language for Children

- Every person is important and valuable.
- All people should be treated fairly.
- Our churches are places where we should accept one another and learn together.
- Each person should be free to search for what is true and right.
- All people have the right to speak out and vote on things that matter to them.
- We should help build a peaceful, fair, and free world.
- We need to take care of the earth, the home we share with all living things.

From *We Believe: Learning and Living Our UU Principles* edited by Ann Fields and Joan Goodwin

About the Authors

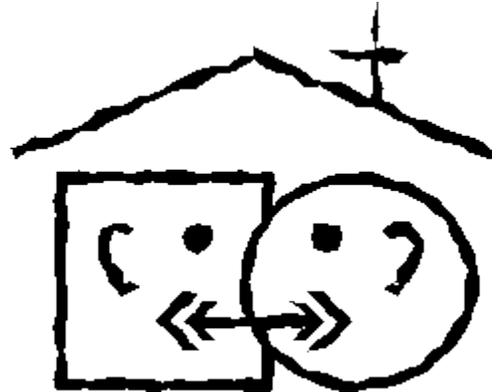
Rev. Patricia Hoertdoerfer is the Children, Family and Intergenerational Programs Director in the UUA's Lifespan Faith Development Staff Group. She is co-convenor of the UUA Family Matters Task Force. Her previous publications include *In Our Hands Grades 4-6*, *Neighboring Faiths*, *Creating Safe Congregations: Toward an Ethic of Right Relations*, and *The Parent Guide for Our Whole Lives Grades K-1 and Grades 4-6*. Pat has served congregations in Syracuse, NY and Bethesda, MD before coming to the UUA. She and her husband have an enduring intercultural partnership of 40 years with a family of four adult children in multicultural families of their own. As the proud Oma of four grandchildren, she believes that it is in the home where we deepen and practice our faith.

Rev. Dr. Lynn Ungar is a parish minister who has served congregations in Moscow, ID, Chicago, IL, and Hayward, CA, before coming to her present work with the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) as *Quest* editor and cyberminister for lifespan religious education. She is a life-long Unitarian Universalist, a minister, a religious educator, and a mother who has developed adult curricula and children's programs in many settings. She is the author of *Blessing the Bread*

UUA Meditation Manual, "Come, Come, Whoever You Are" song, and poems in Marilyn Sewell's collections *Claiming the Spirit Within* and *Cries of the Spirit*.

About the Family Matters Task Force

The mission of the UUA Family Matters Task Force is to transform Unitarian Universalism into a community of families empowered through faith, celebration, support, education, advocacy, and service. Visit their web site at www.uua.org/families for more information about their endeavors, programs, and resources in the service of ministry with Unitarian Universalist families.



About the Series: Taking It Home--Families and Faith

The booklets in this series provide the Unitarian Universalist community with resources to support families in deepening their faith, expanding their future, and supporting their love. The other booklets in this series are *Let's Talk About Respect*, *Let's Talk About Interfaith Families*, *Let's Talk About Marriage and Committed Relationships*, *Let's Talk About Divorce and Broken Relationships*, *Let's Talk About Families and Loss*.

This booklet series is sponsored by the UUA Family Matters Task Force.

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www.uua.org/families