

# PARENTS

## as Spiritual Guides

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Roberta and Christopher Nelson

Unitarian Universalist Association

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*To our grandchildren  
Jack, James and Julia*



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# PREFACE

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*Parents as Spiritual Guides* was created at Star Island when we were asked to be theme speakers for the Religious Education Conference. We appreciate the many contributions made by those who have taught the course and/or taken it. We hope that the real beneficiaries have been the families, and especially the children, whose lives have been enriched by the journey.

John Westerhoff in his book *Will Our Children Have Faith?* and Joseph Campbell, who was asked “Will our children have a spiritual life?” both answered, “If we do.” Ram Dass in *The Only Dance There Is* writes, “The only thing we have to offer another human being ever is our own state of being.” We cannot take these ideas lightly, but we must not be overwhelmed by them. We believe that most parents can be excellent spiritual guides if they take some time to honor their own yearnings, wonderings, and reflections and share them with their children and others.

Unitarian Universalists have many definitions and interpretations of the word *spiritual*, as you will discover in the first session of this program. We urge you to honor yours, and in the company of seekers, to enrich and enhance your own spiritual growth.

Our experience convinces us that children are naturally spiritual even if they do not have the language to express it. In an environment of trust, children are often wide-eyed and full of wonder. Remember walks with little children who stop and touch almost anything along the way; the persistent questions of why and how; the natural curiosity about “Where did I come from?” and “How does it work?”; the wonderings about the tides and stars, life and death. Like so many things, spirituality is “caught as well as taught.” Abraham Heschel reminds us, “The place to look for spiritual substance is in everyday existence. Even the most simple deeds can be full of wonder.”

Whatever your definition of spirituality, it cannot be esoteric or removed. It needs to be lived in the every day. Its expression depends on the values that permeate our way of being together. It needs to be

lived congruently within our faith tradition undergirded by our Principles and sources.

As our spiritual life grows and expands our circumstances and interests, it challenges and nurtures us. This all happens in day-to-day living, in the here and now. Our task is to open ourselves to what is happening and share it with our children.

In *10 Principles of Spiritual Parenting*, Mimi Doe and Marsha Walch write that trust and listening add magic to ordinary experiences and allow and encourage dreams, wishes, and hopes. In *Something More: Nurturing Your Child's Spiritual Growth*, Jean Grasso Fitzpatrick talks of the importance of community as the place where sacred connections are made, where stories are told and remembered, where we gain new perspectives of a wider world.

Some of the most spiritual experiences we have had in our family have evolved around rituals and celebrations. They have given meaning to our lives and have provided continuity between the generations. In today's frantic, frenzied world, rituals are more important than ever. Rituals can help us guide, reconcile, and grow. They build bridges between the past and the future. Our shared story reminds us where we have come from and helps us to see new possibilities for our journey ahead.

In *Secrets of Strong Families*, John DeFrain and Nick Stennett reported the results of their research on families. They found that the primary expression of families' spiritual dimension is in everyday life. These families literally practice what they preach. They believe that the challenges and trials of life are bearable and surmountable because of their spiritual resources. They feel they need the spiritual dimension to give lasting meaning to their lives.

It is our hope that we will all make a covenant with the children in our lives to be their companions and guides on a magnificent journey in which they know the meaning of *transcendence*—literally “the act of climbing over”—a process of moving over or going beyond real or imagined limits or boundaries.



# ABOUT THIS PROGRAM

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## The Facilitator's Role

A facilitator strives to create a supportive, fair, and open environment that encourages participants to risk being vulnerable—to experience and share life at the levels where meaning and conviction grow. No magic set of rules exists to make this happen, but we offer some suggestions from our experiences.

- *Arrange for the meeting space.* The importance of having a comfortable, private meeting space of appropriate size cannot be overstated. Let people know in advance if room changes are necessary.
- *Plan to be at all the sessions.* If you are co-leading the group, try to let the participants know in advance if one co-facilitator cannot be at a session. Changing leadership involves rebuilding the group's relationships—a process that cannot be circumvented.
- *Know the program's structure.* Having a clear sense of what will be addressed in subsequent sessions can help you decide whether a topic should be discussed in depth when it arises or postponed to another session.
- *Arrange for all materials and supplies to be available when needed.* This helps to create the proper environment by avoiding the disruptions of searching for pencils, paper, or other resources in the middle of a session.
- *Plan to arrive at the meeting room before the group.* If the facilitator is not there when the group forms, anxiety arises in participants about whether a misunderstanding of time or place has occurred or if the facilitator is okay. Making a commitment to begin and end the sessions on time is another basic element that builds trust.
- *Ask group members to let you know when they will be late or unable to attend.* An unexpected absence raises concerns and questions that prevent a group from functioning effectively.
- *Help participants get to know one another and to develop trust and rapport.* Even people who have known one another a long time may feel like strangers as they share new aspects of their lives. Building trust and rapport is an essential component of every session. It is helpful to invite people to share a high or low point of the week at the beginning of each session or to speak of something personal of which they are proud.
- *Pay attention to side conversations that disrupt the group.* Invite those speaking privately to state their concerns to the group. This is a basic requisite for building trust and rapport.
- *Strive to prevent an individual or small group from dominating the conversation.* Find out what's really going on. Has the occasion opened the floodgates on a topic of great concern? Is someone afraid of where the discussion may go? Do some individuals feel threatened and see no other way to keep control? Uncovering a hidden agenda can lead to new understanding.
- *Help the group keep focused.* When one or more members often wander away from the topic, the other participants may become frustrated and lose interest. Suggest that one topic be addressed at a time and that the new topic be added to the agenda for a later time. Be sure to return to that new topic.
- *Encourage people to share ideas and experiences.* The group experience is richer and more helpful when everyone participates. When people do not share, the group stagnates. A non-participating member can sometimes passively control the group if others become suspicious of that person's silence. But sharing is always an invitation, never a demand.
- *Guarantee participants the right to pass in a discussion.* It is important for group rapport and trust that people do not feel pressured into sharing more than they feel comfortable or ready to reveal.
- *Support group trust by having participants agree to keep personal confidences that have been shared within the group.* People do not like having their stories retold elsewhere.

- *Listen to the group and encourage clarification.* Try to hear the questions behind the ones being posed. Pay attention to new agenda items and interests. Put-downs or “dumping” on someone’s ideas shatter group trust and rapport.
- *Risk asking tough questions, which can help clarify a confusing issue or generate insight into incongruity.* Tough questions often are the first step toward new understanding and growth.
- *Seek a dynamic balance in your own participation.* In the early sessions, encouraging others’ participation is usually far more fruitful than inadvertently being the one everyone turns to for the “expert” view or answers. As the members build confidence and develop a greater respect for one another, the facilitator can often share more freely from personal experience.
- *Use this guide or additional sheets to make additions and comments that help you.*
- *Relax and enjoy the group.*

### Goals for Participants

- To explore one’s own spiritual journey
- To keep a journal of one’s own insights, affirmations, and questions
- To explore ways to provide spiritual experiences for children
- To appreciate the important role of parents in their children’s spiritual development
- To gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their own or others’ children
- To companion one another on the pilgrimage

### Program Needs

- A facilitator or co-facilitators with skills in group process
- A comfortable, private meeting room with enough space to allow the group to sit in one circle and to divide into smaller groups
- Wall space for posting newsprint lists, definitions, and sharings
- Refreshments (a group responsibility after the first session)
- Books with stories, poems, and other readings for each session and books related to the topic as enrichment for facilitators and participants
- Access to a photocopier prior to sessions

### Program Supplies

- Newsprint
- Markers
- Pencils and pens
- 3 × 5" index cards
- Masking tape
- Folder with pockets and three-hole prongs for each participant
- Lined, 8½ × 11", three-hole punched paper
- Copies of *Singing the Living Tradition*
- 12 × 18" drawing paper
- Writing paper, an envelope, and a stamp for each participant
- Crayons (one box per small group)
- Chalice
- Small candle for each participant and facilitator
- Matches

### Preparing to Lead

- Reserve your meeting room well in advance.
- Publicize the program in more than one way. Possibilities include:
  - Newsletter announcements
  - Flyers
  - Posters
  - Announcements in church
  - Teacher memos
  - RE brochures
  - Mailings to parents
  - Person-to-person contact
- Read and review the entire program.
- Create a calendar of supply and equipment needs and tasks.
- Locate books and resources.
- Make arrangements for photocopying.

# THE FAMILY AND FAITH DEVELOPMENT

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It is currently well accepted that children go through a series of stages in their physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Thanks to the work of Dr. James Fowler (“Perspectives on the Family from the Standpoint of Development Theory,” *Perkins Journal*, Fall 1979) noted authority in the field of the psychology of religion, we are beginning to understand the stages of growth related to “faith development.”

Dr. Fowler defines faith as a dynamic process. He believes faith is a way an individual gives order and coherence to the energy field called life. An individual’s faith includes their image of what they consider to be the “Ultimate Environment” of existence and/or the central value of their life. The word *faith* comes from Greek and Latin roots which include aspects of trust, commitment, and “resting one’s heart” on a person or a reality. Thus, Fowler’s definition challenges us to experience faith as a crucial life-giving and life-sustaining force for our children as well as ourselves.

The family is as important in the development of the child’s faith as it is in their emotional and physical development. Fowler believes the family has evolved to meet four main clusters of needs. These groups of needs, essentials of “being” and “well-being,” are as follows:

1. *Experiences of communion and valued place.* Fowler points out that birth is in a sense an initial “displacement” from our earliest home, the womb. This earliest sense of loss is balanced by the family as they let the infant know that she/he is unique, valued, “irreplaceable,” and very welcome. The infant’s searching and sucking reflexes invite the primary caregivers’ nurturing responses. These first and primal relationships leave a strong, fundamental sense of one’s value and one’s place in the world. As the child grows, the special intimacy offered by the family reinforces this sense either positively or negatively.
2. *Experiences of responsible autonomy.* We have all observed that at times babies want to be held and at other times they want to squirm away and explore. This is the beginning of autonomy. As the child grows and wants to leave the protecting arms of the parent, the family needs to offer supportive encouragement, which makes it safe to fail without an overwhelming loss of face. The family needs to offer support, encouragement, and restraint as the child tests how far she/he can go. Fowler emphasizes that parents need to teach children responsible restraint to prevent them from forming the habit of taking on more than they can adequately and safely handle in life. Loving restraints offer the child positive, successful explorations and help him/her build reservoirs of self-confidence and trust in the world.
3. *Experiences of sharing meanings and rituals.* We human beings are different from other animals in our need to give meaning to life. Our first “meaning-full” experiences occur in the family. As the parents take care of the infant, they not only convey sensitivity to the baby’s needs but also express to the child a deep, feeling conviction that there is greater meaning to what they are doing. As children grow, they make the connection that sounds and words refer to objects and people. When this occurs, they are at the beginning of their ability to enter into the shared meanings of their world. Families directly and indirectly focus on certain shared meanings as a way of giving order and understanding to the greater process called life. These meanings become the building blocks of faith. Rituals are also important to the child in constructing a faith structure. A ritual is any repeated pattern of activity by family members that focuses on a shared meaning or life value. Most families, for instance, have a bedtime ritual for children. These rituals include aspects of affirmation and security for the family members involved. Young children thus both need and love ritual as a way of validating shared meanings and worth. As the child grows, the family’s participation in a religious community’s rituals helps the child gain a further sense of the family’s central life values.

4. *Provisions for bodily sustenance, shelter, and sexual identification.* Fowler lists this grouping of needs last to impress upon us that placing any of these four clusters of needs in a hierarchy is a mistake. The fourth grouping is, of course, essential. And it is also involved in all of the other three clusters of needs. The provision of care, Fowler points out, takes on a “sacramental” character in that it reinforces the sense of worth, support, and shared meaning for those involved.

Fowler encourages families to take these four clusters of needs seriously as the foundation blocks for faith development, a process that continues throughout life. Although the extensive and long-term studies he has conducted have led him to construct various phases or stages of faith development, he urges us not to think of these stages as pigeonholes in which to stuff people. He also warns against thinking of a faith stage sequence as an “achievement scale” but instead asks us to look at it as a way of describing different ways of going about life. A stage is only a “still photograph” of a very dynamic life-long process. An individual may incorporate different aspects of several different stages at the same time. Thus, Fowler’s faith stages might be better described as elements of faith development. All elements of the faith pattern probably lie within us. Some are active; some are dormant. They are somewhat like islands that are connected by bridges and roadways at some points and not connected at others. They are neither right nor wrong. They just are.

James Fowler’s stages (or “elements”) of faith development are as follows:

1. *Undifferentiated faith.* This occurs preverbally and preconceptually during infancy. Infants form their initial impressions of the world and experience sensations of trust, courage, hope, and love (or the lack of these) on a primary, body level.
2. *Intuitive-Projective faith.* This element includes fantasy and imitation. Often, children from three to seven years typify this stage. They can be powerfully and permanently influenced by the examples, moods, actions, and language of the primary adults in their environment. They make sense of the many new things they are experiencing by using an imaginative process that is not restricted or inhibited by “logical” thought. This is a stage of first inner self-awareness. Children at this age have a special intuition and sense of almost magical/mystical connection with the entire universe. Their statements are at times filled with wisdom and an unusual sense of vision, albeit not judged rational or “logical” by adults.
3. *Mythic-Literal faith.* This faith element focuses on literal meanings and the desire to know how things happened. Symbols are taken as one-dimensional and literal. Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience. The shared stories and meanings of one’s family and religious community become very important. The world-view is based on a concept of reciprocal fairness. Beliefs are incorporated with literal meanings. Children ages seven to early adolescence are often operating from this faith element. However, many adults continue to operate primarily from this element. Those in this phase do not step back from the flow of the story to reflect on its meanings. Instead they get caught up with the drama and detail.
4. *Synthetic-Conventional faith.* Here faith must provide a basis for identity and outlook. This element typically surfaces during adolescence, but for many adults it also becomes a point of permanent equilibrium. This is a conformist stage in that it is extremely tuned in to the expectations and judgments of significant others. This faith stage envisions the “Ultimate Environment” in interpersonal terms. The images included come from qualities experienced in personal relationships. Those operating from this faith element do not usually have a sure enough sense of their own self-identity or autonomy to maintain a strong individual perspective in matters of faith.
5. *Individuative-Reflective faith.* This faith element surfaces as a result of serious clashes with the authority sources that were valued in the synthetic-conventional phase. Late adolescence and young adulthood often give rise to this phase. Now the individual must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his/her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes. The tensions to be dealt with here are individuality versus being defined by a group, subjectivity versus objectivity, self-fulfillment versus service to others, and the relative versus the absolute. This

is a “de-mythologizing” stage as the individual seeks to create a much more personally constructed sense of the “Ultimate Environment” or core meaning.

6. *Paradoxical-Consolidative faith.* Disillusionment with one’s compromises and recognition that life is more complex than the individuative-reflective element would have one believe give rise to this faith element. Here there must be some new reworking and reclaiming of one’s past. There must also be an opening to the voices of one’s deeper self. This faith element is alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradiction. This stage strives to unify opposites in mind and experience. It is also open to viewing the truths of others more closely even if they seem threatening to one’s own beliefs. This element reclaims symbol, myth, and ritual in a new and fuller way.
7. *Universalizing faith.* Fowler indicates that this faith element is rarely the “predominating” element in an individual. There are often “glimpses” of it seen in persons. And there are certain rare persons who do seem to truly embody it, whose sense of the Ultimate Environment is inclusive of all being. These individuals create and encourage “zones of liberation” from the social, political, economic, and ideological limitations we so often put on our human future. They live with a felt participation in a power that unifies and transforms the world. For this reason, many times they are seen as subversive by the establishment and often die at the hands of those they wish to change. Fowler describes these “Universalizers” as having a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us.

These elements/phases of faith development can be seen in various ways, especially within an extended family group, composed as it is of individuals of different ages and life experiences. Fowler believes that the faith element (or stage) of the parenting fig-

ures in a family is important in creating or negating the possibilities for faith growth in the child later in life. Sometimes parents who are engaged in less reflective or autonomous stages may inadvertently cause their offspring to rebel religiously in order to seek greater freedom of thought and spirit. For example, parents in the Mythic-Literal stage will emphasize a sin–punishment orientation with “salvation” seen as “prepersonal” and almost mechanical. The personalization of faith and the developing of reflective abilities may be difficult for family members coming from this type of environment.

Parents operating from the Synthetic-Conventional element tend to place great emphasis on the sincerity and genuine feeling of one’s faith commitment rather than on intellectual or critical clarity about the contents, meaning, or basis for such commitments.

Patterns of faith nurturing that develop from the Individuative-Reflective faith element offer children the permission to discuss, question, clarify, and evaluate. This does tend to leave the way open for fuller faith development. However, parents operating from this element need to remember that children still need visible and tangible images and rituals of faith as they develop through the various emotional, cognitive, and faith stages. Children need guidance and feedback as well as the freedom to question and clarify. They need to know and hear that their parents do care about the religious choices and decisions they make. Fowler sees children raised in this type of setting as being encouraged to develop authenticity, consistency, and clarity in their commitments.

Thus, the family is an extremely important factor in faith development. The seeds are planted in the early environment, but the ground can also be prepared for spreading roots and welcoming later seeds. So do nurture the ground as well as the seeds. Let the ground of faith development not be limited in possibility, but be made fertile to seek, find, and nurture truth in ever new and more wonder-filled ways.

—Makanah Elizabeth Morris





# SESSION 1

## Group Building

Supernatural splendor emanates from ordinary acts. The place to look for spiritual substance is in everyday existence. Even the most simple deeds can be full of wonder.

—Abraham Heschel

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### Goals

- To share from our own pilgrimages
- To build trust and support in the group
- To begin to focus on what we want to share with our children

### Materials Needed

- Folders with prongs and pockets for each participant
- 8½ × 11" lined, three-hole-punched paper
- Pencils and pens
- 3 × 5" cards
- Newsprint
- Masking tape
- Markers
- Copies of Handouts 1–4, punched for folders

### Preparation

- Review this session. Divide leadership responsibilities between co-leaders. Sample participant expectations on page 7 may help you anticipate the needs of participants in this program.
- Fill participant folders with notebook paper for use as a workbook. If your congregation cannot provide this material, ask participants to bring their own.
- List the program goals on newsprint to post during the Focus on Group Building activity.
- List the homework reflection questions on newsprint to post during the Homework activity.
- Photocopy Handouts 1–4.

## SESSION PLAN

### Focus on Group Building

*30 minutes*

1. Ask the participants to sit in a circle so that everyone can see one another.

2. Light the chalice and read the Abraham Heschel quote at the beginning of this session.
3. Welcome everyone and introduce yourselves. Invite participants to share their names and a little about themselves, for example, how long they have lived in the community, the number of children they have, and their involvement in the congregation.
4. Ask participants, "What brought you to a Unitarian Universalist society? What has been your religious background? What events in your life caused you to shift your religious thinking?"
5. Post the program goals and introduce them briefly. Review the program schedule.
6. Hand out the participant folders if you are providing them.

### Expectations

*20 minutes*

1. Hand out 3 × 5" cards and ask participants to write a sentence or two about what they hope to gain from this time together.
2. Collect the cards, shuffle them, hand them out, and ask people to read the cards aloud.
3. Point out that the group may not be able to address everyone's expectations; that everyone is there to help one another, that this program is a beginning, and that it is possible to continue the work on their own.
4. Collect the cards. Before the next session, have them typed and copied for each participant.

### Words We Associate with Spirituality

*25 minutes*

1. Divide participants into groups of four. (It is better to have groups of three than groups of five.)
2. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and a marker.
3. Give the groups about 5 minutes to list all the words that they associate with spirituality/spiritual life.

4. Have each group read their list out loud, then post them so all can see.
5. Ask everyone to take about 5 minutes to reflect and write in their folders the spirituality words they own for themselves and their own definitions of spirituality.
6. Ask participants to choose a word or two and share how they would transmit that idea to a child.
7. Distribute Handout 1, Some Definitions of Spirituality, and Handout 2, Words We Associate with Spirituality, which gives examples generated by one group of participants.

### Sharing a Password

#### 25 minutes

1. With participants in the same small groups, hand out 3 × 5" cards.
2. Read aloud and then distribute copies of Handout 3, Generation to Generation.
3. Invite everyone to think of one password that has been handed down to them from another generation. Ask them to write that password on their 3 × 5" cards.
4. Collect and post the 3 × 5" cards.
5. Ask participants to share in their small groups why the word continues to have meaning for them and what events or experiences communicate that meaning to them.
6. Bring the whole group together for sharing reflections or insights from this exercise.

### Homework

#### 5 minutes

1. Explain that the next session offers an opportunity to share experiences of wonder. Invite participants to take some time during the week to write in their folders responses to the following questions:
  - Where do/did you experience wonder?
  - Is there a place that evokes a sense of wonder for you?
  - How do you keep wonder alive in your life?

2. Post the homework reflection questions you have prepared on newsprint.

### Closing

#### 5 minutes

1. Read the following poem.

We would give our children  
 the shiny stream  
 with hidden minnows  
 and racks of leaf shadowed roundness  
 and the laughter of waterfalls.  
 We would give our children  
 a book whose worn pages  
 are bent with reading,  
 whose cover is smooth  
 with living,  
 whose words are bold  
 with the unknown.  
 We would give our children  
 kisses of strength  
 to be shared  
 and eager to love  
 and the knowledge  
 they are good  
 and this is joy.

—Rudolf Nemser, "L.A.C."

2. Lead the group in singing, "Spirit of Life," #123 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, or another song of your choice.
3. Distribute Handout 4, Reflections on Wonder, and ask participants to read it before the next session.

## Sample Participant Expectations

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*Participants in a Parents as Spiritual Guides workshop have listed the following as things they hope to learn from the program. These responses may give you an idea of the range of expectations the members of the group will bring.*

How to counteract selfishness in children.

How to answer questions about God: Where is he? What is church? Why do we go? (for children younger than six)

How to raise and address the concept of faith with one's child. How to approach the teaching of various religious schools of thought. My family was irreligious, and I feel that my upbringing was lacking, missing something, until my junior year at Northfield/Mt. Hermon where we had to take a class in religion (Introduction to the Bible). I don't want that to happen to my children.

How important is it for a child to have a "church identity" while growing up? Is it enough to say "Nobody knows if there is a God, but some people believe there is"?

Building a spiritual life in our kids is hard when we adults are unsure of our own. In our Catholic church, the traditional ceremonies made it easy to define a spiritual life—and it was fun too—the communion, the fasting, the symbolism. How can we recreate the serenity and sense of belonging without the Catholic Church? We object to so much of the Catholic Church, but we miss these aspects.

When I was a child people told me about the Bible and said that was religion. Spirituality was faith and devotion. What do I tell my child, now that I am no longer a Christian?

How can we help young siblings to enjoy each other's special times of recognition without being jealous?

How to celebrate Jewish and Christian holidays without having your children go on overload. Do you find that children can participate in two religions and feel whole?

My husband and I come from different religious backgrounds: Jewish and Methodist. How do we work to blend these traditions with respect for their differences? Sibling rivalry is an issue that I would like to handle in a more "spiritual" fashion, but I am having trouble identifying how to go about it.

How to instill ethical values in children without "benefit" of the dogma of a traditional religion.

My reason for taking the class is partly my own search for meaning and spirituality in my life right now. As I think about things, I think about how to transmit them (or at least, the search) to my son. He is full of questions, even at four, and seems not too young to begin these things.



## Handout 1

### Some Definitions of Spirituality

From *How to Help Your Child Have a Spiritual Life* by Annette Hollander (New York: Bantam Books, 1982).

We are all, adult and child, unique personalities, living our life histories in time and space and yet also part of a large whole that stretches into infinity in all directions, and for which time-space concepts simply do not apply.

When our material, local sense is transcended and we have access to something significantly beyond ourselves which may be within.

Fully connected—with nature, other people, things. Living a life in a fully conscientious, caring, aware way.

Recognizing that we're part of a life force that encompasses all.

A feeling, a connection to a higher power of being—something larger than any person, time or place with a feeling of being uplifted out of the ordinary level of daily living.

The mysterious, the “awe-ful,” anything that transcends the individual’s consciousness. Experiencing wonder.

Means relating to the non-ordinary, non-rational. Implies wholeness and union. Experienced as love, wonder, awe, fear, comfort and mystical feelings.



## Handout 2

### Words We Associate with Spirituality

Part of something larger than you

Feeling

Pay attention to

Stop everything and pay attention

Soul, spirit

Wonderful

Connectedness

Balance

Exciting

Yin/yang

Emotional

Latin

Faith

Accepting life

Peace

Reverence

Anchor

Thoughtful

Principles

Feeling the spirit

Focus

Direction

Shared interconnectedness

Wonderment

Oneness

Tranquil

Force, life, inner strength

Soulful

Non-judgmental

Meditation/prayer

Understanding life

Values and beliefs





## Handout 3

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### Generation to Generation

In a house which becomes a home,  
one hands down and another takes up  
the heritage of mind and heart,  
laughter and tears, musings and deeds.  
Love, like a carefully loaded ship,  
crosses the gulf between the generations.  
Therefore, we do not neglect the ceremonies  
of our passage: when we wed, when we die,  
and when we are blessed with child;  
When we depart and when we return;  
When we plant and when we harvest.  
Let us bring up our children. It is not  
the place of some official to hand to them  
their heritage.  
If others impart to our children our knowledge  
and ideals, they will lose all of us that is  
wordless and full of wonder.  
Let us build memories in our children,  
lest they allow treasures to be lost because  
they have not been given the keys.  
We live, not by things, but by the meanings  
of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords  
from generation to generation.

—Adapted from Antoine de St. Exupery,  
“Generation to Generation”

As I read these words and think about recent articles I have read, I wonder what we are handing down from generation to generation. There are few among us who are not aware of the fragmented and frenetic lives that many of us lead. I am afraid we have begun to accept this as the norm. As I listen to people tell me about their daily lives, I envision family members scurrying to and fro, rarely coming together for a meal or a quiet time to share what is really happening in their daily lives.

How did it get this way, and how can we change the pattern? I envy our Mormon friends with their regular family night. It is a given in Mormon families that one evening per week everyone stays home and engages in some kind of family program. They have a

“curriculum” for families. What would happen in our communities if we decided to set aside one evening for family time? Imagine an evening when the church would be dark!

Our own three daughters are all on their own. The years have gone by quickly. I have few regrets. It was not easy to juggle all the schedules to create family time. We have been rewarded by their remembrances of mealtimes, summers at Star Island, family celebrations and holidays, birthdays, vacations, and books and stories shared.

What most of us want are happy, healthy, ethical, religious children. Many of the writers we have read believe that what children need most is a sense that there is a regular, dependable quality to the world in which they live. Our children will need to find it in the family and in the church because our world only gives us glimpses of the regular and dependable.

The sense of security in Antoine de St. Exupery’s poem, “Generation to Generation,” is what we can give our children. We must give them time as well, time to be and to do, time unstructured and flexible, time to be with us so we are there to companion them on the spiritual journey.

Here are some of the passwords that I hope we pass on to our children:

*Heritage and Roots* so that they will know the richness of our past and be enriched by, as well as add to, their color and variety.

*Family*: Regardless of what kind of family you are—gay, straight, blended or single, traditional or non-traditional—that sense of connectedness to others who will care for you, know you, trust you, and love you unconditionally.

*Stories*: Family stories, bedtime stories, stories from great writers, stories from other cultures and traditions. Stories connect us; they bind us together with people everywhere. They rekindle memories. They weave the fabric of our lives together.

*Celebrations* for creating rituals, for connecting us to our past, for rekindling stories and memories that keep our lives from being drab and colorless, that awaken, that are vital and fun.

*Risk*: A willingness to venture forth into the unknown; to know that mistakes are waiting to happen; to know how to learn from them.

*Challenge*: To try; to test your limits; to use your gifts. To know that “to venture causes anxiety, not to venture is to lose oneself.” (Søren Kierkegaard)

*Courage*: The courage to be who and what you are. To change when you need to, to stand your ground when that is your choice. “Say yes to life. Say yes to the impossible possibility.” (Dag Hammarskjöld)

*Compassion*: Know your pain and the pain of others. Own your tenderness and see it in others. “Compassion is the result of the tough and tender experiences of life.” (Richard S. Gilbert)

*Honesty*: In this world of ambiguity and incongruity, be clear with yourself. Strive to be ethical. Know that the path is strewn with danger. “To thine own self be true, and it shall follow as the night and the day, that thou can’st then be false to [anyone].” (William Shakespeare)

*Justice*: Leave the world a little better for your having been here. Know that one person can make a difference. That one day we might live in a nation where in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “Our children will be judged by the content of their character.”

Each of you has your list of passwords to pass from generation to generation. Make them real in the lives of your children and yourselves by sharing them and acting on them.

—Bobbie Nelson

## Handout 4

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### Reflections on Wonder

I grew up in the city where much of the world of natural wonders did not seem to cross my landscape. The stars were not so bright because of city lights, the gardens were few, the smells of new grass were camouflaged with other city smells, long walks in the woods or on beaches were not in my family's schedule. But there were other wonders—diverse people, public transportation, elevators, the soapbox orators on Boston Common, wailing sirens, and for many, survival amid great chaos. I doubt that in my growing up experience anyone ever took the time to name wonder as a password. In retrospect I suspect that wonder may be a luxury of our life situation, but at the very least it needs to be named by those who value it.

It is often said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, implying that the eye must be trained, first to see and then to see beauty. Let me reword it: Wonder is in the eye of the beholder. This implies that we must be trained to “see” and then to see wonder.

Earlier I said that wonder may be a luxury of our life situation. However, Anne Frank wrote, “I still believe that people are really good at heart.” Those words were penned under the most adverse conditions, amidst the horror of war and death. Someone or something had opened Anne's heart and mind to see beyond what seems to be. Wonder is those sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that ask us to see beyond the seen to the unseen.

I have always thought that it was at Star Island that I saw the stars for the first time—stars unencumbered by city lights. At Star there have been times when I could truly say, “We are of the stars,” or “Out of the stars have we come.” Once the eyes were opened, they could not be closed. I returned to city life and saw the stars as if for the first time.

Rachel Carson, in her book *Sense of Wonder*, challenges us to cherish wonder as an antidote to the blight of the workaday world. Chris and our daughters have taught me to wonder, time and time again. During our daughters' growing up it was important to pull off the road to see a double rainbow, to wake at dawn to catch the first person in space on TV, to wrap

ourselves in blankets and sit in the yard to catch the moon's eclipse.

I doubt that it is an accident that our daughter Heather on her arrival in Africa requested books about stars, birds, and plant life, or that she chose to return home from her Peace Corps experience by way of African Safaris, the rocky coast of Scotland, and isles in the fjords of Norway. I suspect that it is not happenstance that all three of our daughters are avid photographers, and that much of what they choose to photograph is of the natural world.

If I had the power of a good fairy, I would bless our children's lives with wonder so that their lives could be transformed by its power and their souls would be nourished by its grace.

—Bobbie Nelson

Wonders still the world shall witness  
Never known by those of old.  
Never dreamed by ancient sages  
How so ever free and bold  
Wonder sons and daughters shall inherit  
Wondrous arts to us unknown  
When the dawn of peace its splendor  
Over all the world has thrown.

—Jacob Trapp,  
“Wonders Still the World Shall Witness”

It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know the sense of wonder and humility.

—Rachel Carson



In my growing up, wonder came first in the natural world—the night sky, the ever-changing sea. I recall my father showing me the Milky Way, a myriad beyond my reach, a beckoning presence overreaching the sky that even as a small child filled me with awe. Something happened in that experience. I was somehow connected to that arch of sky. I believe I

sensed even then that there were experiences beyond description, questions I could not frame, yet the transforming power was there. Years later, I know much more about our galaxy, cosmological theory, and the learnings gleaned from centuries of struggle to reconcile the tantalizing bits and pieces of information that we catch in ever more sophisticated nets. Yet my sense of awe and wonder is in no way diminished as I look out at the night sky. Instead I am also awed by our wondrous ability to inquire, to investigate, to construct ideas, to test them and to inquire again. Is this any less a wonder than the stars themselves?

I grew up a short walk from the seashore in Quincy, Massachusetts. My mother would take my brothers and me to the shore to play, but once again I was wonder-struck by this amazing realm. What made the tide go in and out? How far did the waves come from? What happened to all the creatures that once filled the millions of shells? My mother never seemed to tire of my questions even though each one led to another and another until we were in touch with something far larger than ourselves and we would be silent together, bound in an experience transcending words.

I learned too of the awesome power of the sea. As a child of six I became caught in an undertow and was pulled inexorably into water over my head. I struggled to get back but only succeeded in swallowing a lot of water. My mother pulled me out. I remember sitting on the beach, cold, frightened, with a stomach still bloated, and yet the waves came gently in to the shore. There was no trace of the power that had nearly drowned me. Yet I knew it was still there.

We have shared experiences of wonder with our daughters: stopping to see the northern lights on our

way to a conference at Ferry Beach, discovering the amazing variety of life in a tidal pool at Star Island, sharing the mysteries of life from the thrill of birth to the heartfelt stillness of death.

One experience that stands out happened during a storm at Star Island many years ago. It was no surprise to have a sudden thunderstorm on a hot summer afternoon, but the wind and rain in this one were like nothing I had ever experienced. Doors slammed open or shut; paper and debris filled the air; the fence around the tennis court was flattened; the tall flagpole bent over until the top was parallel to the ground like a bow drawn to its limit by an unseen archer. And in the harbor hidden from view by the wind and spray, we knew there was a sailboat with several conferees on board. How could they survive, and what could we do except be together for each other as this relentless drama unfolded. The storm ended. The torrential rain stopped. The violent wind gave way to calm. The flagpole stood as straight as ever. And with awe and reverence we welcomed back the crew who had miraculously survived their ordeal just beyond our helpless grasp. As many times as our family has recalled this experience, we are ever aware of being part of something far larger than ourselves, a drama beyond any mindful understanding.

Rudolph Otto identified two primary themes in religion: salvation and wonder or awe. He explained that Western religion has been built almost wholly on the first, but for me it is through wonder that I am in touch with the ineffable—that realm beyond my reach but whose power I can always feel.

—Chris Nelson

# SESSION 2

## Wonder

If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.

—Rachel Carson

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### Goals

- To help claim/reclaim the place of wonder in our lives
- To articulate how we keep wonder alive in our lives
- To create opportunities for our children to know and experience wonder in their lives

### Materials Needed

- 12 × 18" sheets of drawing paper
- Crayons
- Newsprint
- Markers
- Masking tape
- Pens and pencils
- Copies of Handout 5, Reflections on Courage, punched for folders
- Copies of relevant books or other resources to display

### Preparation

- Review the session and divide leadership responsibilities with your co-leader.
- Plan to give the opening activity, Focus on Group Building, the time your group needs. We find that taking time for group building at the first few sessions develops rapport and enables people to share more openly.
- Photocopy Handout 5, Reflections on Courage, for all participants.
- Type and photocopy the participants' expectations from the index cards in Session One if you plan to distribute them.
- List the homework reflection questions on newsprint.

### SESSION PLAN

#### Focus on Group Building

##### *20 minutes*

1. Welcome participants to the circle. Light the chalice saying the words of Rachel Carson at the beginning of this session.
2. Invite everyone to share their names.
3. Have everyone check in by sharing something spiritual they have experienced since the last session.
4. Then have each person share a treasure, using one of the following three options:
  - Ask, "If you could bring something here that you really treasure, something that would tell us something about you, what would it be? There are no restrictions as to size, etc., on the treasure you might bring." OR
  - Ask participants to share something they treasure about their children. OR
  - With an especially verbal group, ask everyone to write their treasure on a piece of paper and pass it to their neighbor to read aloud.

#### Focus on a Place of Wonder

##### *30 minutes*

1. Divide participants into groups no larger than four. Encourage participants to be with different people each session.
2. Give each person a large sheet of drawing paper and give each group a set of crayons.
3. Ask everyone to close their eyes, sit quietly, and visualize a place that evokes wonder.
4. After a minute or two, ask people to take the paper and crayons and draw that place, or, if they prefer, to write a poem that conveys the sense of

that place. Tell them they will have about 10 minutes.

5. Within their small groups, have them share their drawings or poems and the memories that were evoked.
6. Bring the whole group together for sharing. Ask, “What kind of place did you visualize? Is that place available to you now? What were some of the similarities and differences in your group?”

### **Focus on Sharing Your Reflections from the Homework**

#### **30 minutes**

1. Have people return to the same small groups to share what they chose from their homework reflections.
2. When everyone is finished, or after about 10 minutes, have people call out, and record on newsprint, the kinds of places, feelings/remembrances of the place, and how one keeps those feelings/remembrances alive.
3. Give each group newsprint and markers and ask them to brainstorm a list of ways that children can be introduced to wonder.
4. Have the small groups post their lists and share them in the large group.

### **Focus on Writing**

#### **10 minutes**

Invite participants to spend a few minutes writing in their folders about a discovery they made this session.

### **Homework**

#### **5 minutes**

1. Explain that the next session will focus on their experiences with courage. Post the following list of questions you have prepared on newsprint, go over them briefly, and suggest that participants consider them in their reflections and journal-writing.
  - What has been your experience with courage?
  - Was there a time/place when you felt courageous?
  - Was there a time/place when you wished you could have been courageous?
  - Where did you learn about courage?
  - Who are the people or events you associate with courage?
2. Post the homework reflection questions you have prepared on newsprint.

### **Closing**

1. Read, or have the group read responsively, #439, “We Gather in Reverence,” by Sophia Lyon Fahs in *Singing the Living Tradition*.
2. Sing together, “Spirit of Life,” #123 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.
3. Distribute copies of Handout 5, Reflections on Courage, and ask participants to read it for the next session.
4. Distribute copies of participants’ expectations for this program if you have prepared them.

## Handout 5

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### Reflections on Courage

We asked you to think about a “profile in courage,” and we wish to begin with some profiles of our own.

While I was growing up, my parents modeled comfort with difference; they conveyed to me images of people who had been courageous. I thought of the profiles I wished to share. I realized they were gilded by my growing-up experiences and my parents’ values.

The TV documentary *Eyes on the Prize* rekindled for me images of courage. By a simple act—refusing to sit at the back of the bus—Rosa Parks woke this nation in a new way to inequality and injustice. And then there were the children who either singly, in pairs, or in small groups integrated all-white schools in the South. It had to take courage beyond my understanding to walk through jeering, angry, hostile crowds. During the Civil Rights Movement there were well-known leaders, but what truly carried the day were the acts of courage by ordinary men, women, and children who risked all they were for all they and we could be.

During the mid-1950s I was an active LRYer. In 1955 or ‘56 we chose to hold our annual conference in Guilford, North Carolina, at a small Quaker college. We chose Guilford College because it was an integrated school, and we knew our conference would be integrated. The community was not, and some of the local LRYers and ministers educated us about the harsh realities in the segregated world of the South. The importance of taking a stand was quite simple in comparison to learning about the implications of southern segregation and the dangers of modeling a different behavior. My recollections of that week have faded, but I do remember how careful we were about knowing who was there, attendance at events, bed checks, and the presence of strangers.

In recent years I have stood in awe of those men and women who are openly gay. As a community of religious people we are on the whole intellectually accepting of the diversity of sexual orientations. As a trainer for *About Your Sexuality*, I have observed that there is now substantially less anxiety about teaching about homosexuality and less fear from parents.

However, when I listen to the gay men and lesbians who I know or are members of my church community, I realize we have a long way to go. They tell stories of not being included, of expressed fear that too many gays in the church will frighten off straight people, of embarrassment on the part of others when they appear at an event with their partners. I doubt that I have ever had to be as courageous as they are especially now that AIDS has invaded our world.

In our newcomers’ groups, I often ask people to share a person who has been an influence on their lives. At a recent meeting I mentioned our daughter Heather because of her decision to enter the Peace Corps. I think it takes courage to go off to a country where health care, sanitation, and communication are almost nonexistent; to live among strangers, to do your job in an impoverished country without diminishing their self-esteem; to open yourself constantly to new ideas, experiences, and ways of being. But harder still was the decision to buck the current tide of “me first,” “money before all else,” compassion later or not at all. Heather’s courage has inspired me to think about being a volunteer in retirement.

Finally, I want to talk about an opportunity we had to be courageous. We had only been married a few months when the Open Housing Committee in Needham approached us. They needed a couple who could “shop” for a house to test whether certain real estate agents would sell to African Americans. My first thought at the time was, why me? We were new to town; we were just married; it didn’t seem glamorous. Wasn’t there another way? Well, in those days you did what you could do. We discovered those who found all kinds of excuses not to show certain neighborhoods to African Americans, neighborhoods that were readily available to whites. We also found a few courageous agents who joined our cause.

In truth, I learned courage from others, from my interactions with them, from the stories about them, from my willingness to take risks with them. Courage involves risk and fear. Fear can be a prodder, a pusher. It can keep us from being insensitive or foolish. It can help keep our courage in check so that we do not

forget that courage involves freedom and responsibility. Lillian Smith said that freedom and responsibility are like Siamese twins; they die if they are parted.

Courage involves risk. Risk is venturing into the unknown. The landscape may be rough, the terrain steep. We may fall and stumble. We may make a wrong turn on the path. It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all, William James tells us.

Courage opens us to vulnerability. Our values and decisions are no longer hidden away. We are open to ridicule, challenge, anger, fear, and the judgment of others. The alternatives to that choice are bleak indeed: We would not chart new territory, change old patterns, create new opportunities, or envision a better world. Courage is not born or made in heaven. Courage is lived—created by trial, error, choices, and passion.

So if I had the power of the good fairy, I would ask her to bless all of our children's lives with courage, enabling them to be

Pioneers with vision,  
Heretics with passion,  
Decision makers with design,  
Healers with grace.

—Bobbie Nelson



I and, I suspect, many of you remember reading John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage* with a stirring of the heart. I would like to share some profiles from my own life. Who would you share from yours?

Grandmother. My father's mother, or Nana, as we grandchildren all called her, was born and spent her childhood on a small farm near Motala, Sweden. While much of life was good in her growing-up years, times were hard and the future bleak.

So as a young woman of sixteen, she persuaded her mother and father to let her leave the home she loved to come to work in the United States. The year was about 1894. A one-way ticket was all the family could afford, and though she had some contacts in this country, she had no assurances where her adventure would lead. But she came. She worked as a maid and a housekeeper. She learned English, married, and raised a family.

Yes, she was a loving grandmother, knitting sweaters for teddy bears, telling the stories she had learned as a girl, knowing those things that would delight her grandchildren. But for me she was much more. She was a woman of great courage.

Mother. It was the spring of 1943. My father was in the navy stationed in San Francisco while the rest of us were home in Quincy, Massachusetts. We all missed our life together as a family, but changing that situation was not easy. Railroad tickets were not easy to come by; members of the armed forces had top priority and one could be bumped at any time. This was not like planning a vacation. The house had to be rented for an uncertain time. Once commitments were made, there was no turning back.

My mother was undaunted. She rented the house, packed for herself and three children (one five, one six, and one still an infant) not just clothes for the trip but food as well; there would only be limited access to a dining car. She had few illusions. The trip was a constant challenge, not the least of which was a frantic taxi ride across the city of Chicago. Our train arrived late, and we boldly made our way across the city from one station to another serving west-bound trains.

We made it to San Francisco and were reunited for a few months.

It would have been much easier for my mother to have let the separation remain. It was only her courage that allowed us to be together again.

Daughter. When one of our daughters was in second grade, tragedy struck. One night the home of one of her classmates caught fire. The fire was intense, and though her classmate Jimmy was saved, his two-year-old brother died in the fire.

Her class was shocked and not really ready for Jimmy's return a few days later. Jimmy, still shaken by the loss of his home and his brother, would have moments when he could no longer hold back the tears. "Fraidy Cat!" "Sissy!" his classmates jeered, unready to face their own terror and fears. "No, no, no," said our daughter taking them all on. "You can't do that to Jimmy. Wouldn't you cry if it had been your brother?" The taunting was over and seen for what it was.

Adults have no special hold on courage.



My own story begins with an experience from childhood, my first realization at the age of seven that African Americans in this country were treated with degradation and forced to suffer the humiliations of segregation. Even then I was appalled that in a South Carolina courthouse I could drink water from a cooler while others had to drink from a faucet that ran on the floor. I grew up with a liberal's guilt, wanting to make amends for the horrible injustices I saw around me.

I hadn't really moved beyond this stage when I met Bobbie. Most of her family's neighbors were African American, and I enjoyed the pleasant chance to meet them. One day, however, I noticed a group of eight- to ten-year-old kids playing catch in her yard. I was horrified to discover that it was a puppy they were throwing back and forth and that they were laughing with glee at every anguished yelp and cry of the dog. I realized that I could not be "nice" to these kids and just act as if I didn't know what was going on.

In no uncertain terms I told them they could not do that to a dog, that I would not let them abuse an animal; the cruel game was over.

At that moment Mr. Johnson, Bobbie's upstairs neighbor, arrived and thanked me for stopping them. "They need to hear someone say no," he said. "They need to know somebody really does care!"

I was not afraid of the children. I was afraid that for me to call them to task as a white person was racist, yet I could not ignore their cruelty. Mr. Johnson's remarks affirmed my decision. I emerged a different person.

As I have sketched these profiles, I have come to realize that often our view of courage is idealized, seen as a possession of the few, a characteristic only attributable to those larger than life like Sir Gawain challenging the Green Knight. We are embarrassed and awkward about recognizing the essential role of courage in our own spiritual growth. Can we expect our children to make decisions with courage, to say yes to life, when we ourselves are unable to share with them the importance of courage in our own lives?

"Heroes and heroines are no braver than anyone else," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "but they are brave five minutes longer."

—Chris Nelson



# SESSION 3

## Courage

The practice of a moral life is itself a form of spirituality . . . people joining together to support each other in their efforts to reach a common goal, a vision of a better life for all people.

—Annette Hollander

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### Goals

- To help participants identify the ways in which they have been courageous
- To explore issues that make being courageous easy or hard
- To plan ways to explore courage with our children

### Materials Needed

- Newsprint
- Markers
- Masking tape
- Pens and pencils
- Photocopies of Handout 6, Reflections on Justice
- Resource materials to share

### Preparation

- Read the session and divide leadership responsibilities with your co-leader.
- Photocopy Handout 6, Reflections on Justice, for all participants.
- List the homework reflection questions on newsprint.

### SESSION PLAN

#### Opening

##### 30 minutes

1. Welcome participants to the circle. Light the chalice using the words of Annette Hollander at the beginning of this session for the opening reading.
2. Go around the circle asking people to share an event from the past week that they would name spiritual.
3. Mention John F. Kennedy's book *Profiles in Courage*. Go around the circle a second time, inviting people to share profiles they would add to such a book. Point out that the person does

not have to be famous. Remind the group that passing in the circle is always acceptable.

#### Focus on Courage

##### 30 minutes

1. Divide participants into groups of not more than four, encouraging people to join someone they have not yet worked with in a small group.
2. Invite people to take a minute or two to write down an example of courage from their own lives, and/or a time they were courageous. When they are ready, ask them to share these or other reflections from their homework. Remind them that what they share is their choice.
3. When everyone is finished, give each group newsprint and a marker and ask them to record the feelings evoked, the events experienced, and the learning they gained from the exercise.
4. Have participants share these lists in the large group and post them where everyone can see them.

#### Focus on Children

##### 20 minutes

1. Ask the group to take a few minutes in silence to think about the children in their lives and their experiences with courage.
2. After a few minutes, have a volunteer record on newsprint responses to the question, How can we help children know about courage?
3. Invite people to share times when children they know acted courageously and how they affirmed them.

#### Focus on Writing

##### 5–10 minutes

1. Invite participants to take a few minutes to reflect and write in their folders
  - an affirmation from this session and

- some ways to put that affirmation into practice with children.

## Homework

### 5 minutes

1. Explain that the next session focuses on justice. Invite participants to think about these questions and record their reflections in their folders:
  - What has been your experience with justice and injustice?
  - Where did you first encounter these issues?
  - What people/events raised these issues for you?
  - What changes came about in your life because of these experiences?
2. Post the questions you have prepared on newsprint.

## Closing

1. Read the following from Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*:

I don't know Who—or what—put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer *Yes* to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

2. Sing together, "I'm On My Way," #116 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.
3. Distribute Handout 6, Reflections on Justice, and ask participants to read it before the next session.

## Handout 6

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### Reflections on Justice

Justice seekers are hissers! I have spent a good part of my life hissing. There are the political campaigns—lots of telephone calls, chairing election campaigns, raising funds for my candidate, and, with children in tow, door-to-door pamphleting, the dining room turned into campaign headquarters. There were the long waits to see if we had won; there was the sweetness of winning and the bitterness of defeat. There were grape and lettuce boycotts for the farm workers. I remember a summer at Star Island when we discovered that the island was serving lettuce from one of the boycotted groups. We protested and asked the Island not to serve lettuce the rest of the week. And then a group of us (children included) threw the lettuce into the ocean. Boycotts that changed the family's eating habits brought home to our children values that were important to share.

There were the marches, prayer vigils, and worship services opposing the Vietnam War, and the telephone calls and letters to let our representatives know how we felt. There were the petitions and demonstrations.

I have hissed about Pro Choice and the ERA. I have served on town committees to improve education. I have counseled about the draft and abortion. I have carefully budgeted so that some of our income goes to support our church and the causes we believe in.

And within our own UUA I have worked toward the fulfillment of a dream that there would be a ministry of religious education. Because it has touched me so personally, and because it is within my church home, it has been harder to take the anger, hostility, and ridicule.

There have been dark and trying times on this journey. There has been loss of friendship, lack of understanding, and ostracism. I have few regrets about the risks I have taken. I have in many ways lived up to the expectation that I should leave the world a little better than I found it.

A list of the causes I have supported is long. They read like a good liberal bible. Each cause in its own way has urged us as a nation, a family, a religious com-

munity to reexamine our relationships, our values, our meanings.

Causes, yes. Persistence, yes. Change agent, yes. Like Daniel Berrigan, I would not mind if my tombstone read, "May I never rest in peace."

However, there must be a root cause for what Martin Marty says is a "wide-spread sense of moral decay." After numerous interviews, the authors of *Habits of the Heart* write, "It is not clear that many Americans are prepared to consider a significant change in the way we have been living . . . the allure of the packaged good life is still strong. . . . Americans are fairly ingenious in finding temporary ways to counteract the harsher consequences of our damaged social ecology. . . . We have reached the point where we cannot bear either our vices or their cure."

A cure is needed if our children are to inherit a world of peace and justice. We need to challenge individualism and competition. We need to teach ourselves and our children to collaborate and cooperate for the common good. The American dream is not unlike a phrase in our old Unitarian "creed" — onward and upward forever. There will be no dream for our children if we do not begin now to reorder our priorities, redistribute wealth, reconsider our purpose on this earth. As Robert Bellah, the author of *Habits of the Heart*, writes, "Our problems today are not political, they are moral and have to do with the meaning of life."

May our lives be blessed with  
The wisdom to know ourselves,  
The compassion to respond to the pain of others,  
Commitment to justice, and  
A vision of a better world.

—Bobbie Nelson



For me the event that marked the turning point in my life was my marriage to Bobbie. I had always valued justice, but had little experience acting on my convictions. That changed. In the Needham church,

I discovered there was much to be done in a neglected part of my life. One of our first projects was to support fair housing in the town by finding those real estate agents who were willing to show homes to African Americans. I was glad to have the chance to open the town to those like the commander of the local NIKE base who had been denied the opportunity to look at housing. We participated in a project to secure work release privileges for inmates in the county jail. Many were serving time for not supporting their families, yet they had no opportunity to get the experience they needed to get or hold a job while they were in jail. Not every case was a success story, but it was rewarding to see men who were proudly able to provide some support to their families for the first time and to have a job to continue their employment when their jail term was over. I discovered there was no lack of opportunities to make a difference in how justice was incorporated into our community's life.

As our daughters grew, we wanted them to understand the causes we supported. They went with us to rallies, marches, and other peaceful protests. They

helped stuff envelopes and deliver materials from door to door in support of projects to improve the quality of justice in our town. I believe our involvement enriched their lives. They still remember the good experiences as a host family for METCO (a program that enrolled inner-city youth in suburban schools) and their bewilderment over our boycott of the grapes and lettuce we wanted for our table. As they now take their places in the adult world, I see them each in their own distinct ways ready to contribute to the quality of life for all in the communities around them.

In *Parents as Social Justice Educators*, we state, "Justice is caught, not taught." As Angus MacLean said, "We cannot keep from a child what is of most worth to us, what is indifferent to us, nor what we negate or avoid even though we never talk about them." The power of the home is everywhere acknowledged in the area of emotional health and it is no less powerful in the area of moral growth and spiritual sensitivity.

—Chris Nelson

# SESSION 4

## Justice

The compassionate person may not strike but knows when to hiss: hiss sensitively and strategically.

—Tom Owen-Towle

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### Goals

- To explore the role of justice and injustice in our own lives
- To identify turning points in our lives that were associated with issues of justice
- To help our children identify issues of justice and injustice and respond appropriately

### Materials Needed

- Newsprint
- Markers
- Masking tape
- Pens and pencils
- 12 × 18" drawing paper
- Crayons
- Copies of Handout 7, Reflections on Faith, for folders
- Resources for display

### Preparation

- Read the session and divide leadership responsibilities with your co-leader.
- Photocopy Handout 7, Reflections on Faith.
- List on newsprint the homework reflection questions to post at the appropriate time.

## SESSION PLAN

### Opening

#### 20 minutes

1. Welcome participants and gather the group in a circle. Light the chalice, reading the words by Tom Owen-Towle at the beginning of this session.
2. Read the following excerpt from *From Generation to Generation*, by Tom Owen-Towle

Dear Hissers,

Howard Thurman, the black liberal minister in his splendid meditative journal entitled, *Deep Is The Hunger*, relates the story in Buddhist writings concerning a village whose population was being destroyed by the periodic attacks of a cobra.

At length a holy person came to the village. The plight of the people was made known to her. She urged the snake to stop his destruction. The snake agreed to leave the villagers alone. After some time the people discovered that the snake was no longer dangerous.

Fear of the cobra disappeared and, instead, there developed a boldness, even meanness. The cobra's tail was pulled, water was thrown on him, little children threw sticks and bits of stone.

Finally, the snake's existence was increasingly perilous. He was nearly dead.

The holy one returned. The snake was livid. "I did as you commanded me; I stopped striking the villagers and now see what they have done to me. What must I do?"

The holy woman replied: "You did not obey me fully. It is true that I told you not to bite the people, but I did not tell you not to *hiss* at them!"

Call it healthy hissing or gracious grumbling. Call it what you will, we need it . . . in our partnerships, our families, our communities. The compassionate person may not strike but knows when to hiss: hiss sensitively and strategically.

Hissing is the same thing for me, kids, as showing my anger. Most confuse anger with hostility.

Anger is productive, if vented for impact. It becomes hostility, if released for injury.

Your mother and I try, upon going to bed, to work through our angry feelings from the day rather than harboring grudges or clinging to resentments. It may be good advice for your children too.

Hiss but do not bite!

Happy hissing,

Father

—Tom Owen-Towle, "Hissing"

3. Invite people to share something that they keep hissing at.

### **Focus on Justice**

#### **30 minutes**

1. Divide participants into groups no larger than four.
2. Give each person a piece of drawing paper and give each group a box of crayons.
3. Ask people to draw a circle and divide it into three parts.
4. Invite people to sit quietly and think of three events in which they were involved with justice/injustice issues.
5. After a minute or two, ask people to draw a symbol or image of those events in each of the sections of the circle.
6. When everyone has finished, ask them to share in the small groups their drawings and the feelings and memories evoked.
7. Bring the large group together and invite brief sharings of some of the events, feelings, and memories recalled in this exercise.

### **Focus on Spirituality and Justice**

#### **25 minutes**

1. Have a volunteer record on newsprint responses to the question, How are justice and spirituality connected?
2. After 5 to 10 minutes, or when ideas are coming slowly, ask, "How can we help our children with justice issues?" Record responses on another sheet of newsprint.

### **Focus on Writing**

#### **5–10 minutes**

Invite participants to take a few moments to write in their notebooks

- an insight from this session or
- an issue of justice that still haunts them.

### **Homework**

#### **5 minutes**

1. Point out that the next session focuses on faith. For homework, invite participants to reflect on the following questions and respond in their notebooks if they wish.
  - Faith is . . .
  - When was faith a companion on your journey?
  - How is your faith kept alive?
  - Has your faith failed you?
2. Post the questions you have prepared on newsprint.

### **Closing**

1. Read, or have a participant read, the words of V. Emil Gudmundson, #693 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.
2. Sing together, "We Are a Gentle, Angry People," #170 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.
3. Distribute Handout 7, Reflections on Faith, and invite participants to read it before the next session.



## Handout 7

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### Reflections on Faith

I grew up in a Unitarian Universalist family and church. I do not remember the word *faith* as part of my family's or church's vocabulary. I do not remember discussions about faith in college, LRY, or theological school. I do not remember anyone talking about faith in my first church, Needham, Massachusetts. I do not remember any of our religious education curricula or the religious education philosophy books talking about faith—religion, yes; faith, I doubt it. If it was actively discussed, I surely missed it.

In the early 1970s I had a chance to claim the word and add it to my religious vocabulary. I can thank the planners of a Meadville/Lombard Winter Institute who invited Dr. James Fowler to be the theme presenter. For me it was a turning point—faith is a way of knowing; faith is something we do; faith is an action word. It helps one name that which is otherwise impossible to name. Because I did not have any negative connotations attached to the word, I have not had to reframe its meanings. It has been an expanding of my religious vocabulary and has helped me to articulate some of my most precious moments.

Our friend Bejee Thompson, while dying of cancer, wrote, "I . . . take each day as it comes because I would panic over the possibilities otherwise, and faith gives me strength, calmness and serenity." Bejee's dying process was a powerful experience for me. As I watched and listened and felt, I was constantly aware of how deep were her wellsprings of faith in herself, her doctors, her family, and her friends. She knew that she could do it and that her spirit would triumph. She gave us all a gift beyond words to explain. I was nourished beyond measure and knew that she had served as a guide and mentor for my own faith journey.

Faith has been my companion on my pilgrimages. Faith in myself and others helped me cope with my father's death. Faith has made it possible for me to reach out to others in the darkness following a tragedy. Others' faith in me has made it possible for me to stretch the boundaries of my knowing, and to lead my first Death and Dying seminar when our

friend Charles was facing death because of multiple sclerosis.

When I married Chris, one of the things I knew was that he was a sailor. My experience with water had been quite terrifying. I nearly drowned when I was eight. I knew that eventually there would be an opportunity for us to do some sailing. A few years ago D Day arrived. We would be sailing for several days with friends. All was going quite well; my sail mates were excellent sailors—careful, courteous, and caring. We were in Nantucket Harbor on a mooring when a storm came out of nowhere. Boats were being torn from moorings, thrown onto the shore, or bounced against one another. I remained quite calm. Somewhere deep inside I had faith in my sailing partners' skills and in the Coast Guard's knowledge.

Many times I have been asked, "How could you let one of your daughters (Heather, Joy, or Jennifer) do such or such?" (travel alone, join the Peace Corps, even be a Pelican at Star Island) The implication was always, Aren't you worried? Do you trust them? How do you know they will do the right thing? I have faith in them—in their decision making, their intuition, their skills, their abilities. All along the way I have tried to provide experiences, skills, trust so that they would be able to affirm who they were and who they wished to become. This is truly a gift handed down from generation to generation because I can honestly say that my parents had faith in me.

My faith in the basic goodness of people has been tested many times. I have doubted on many occasions Anne Frank's words, "I believe that people are really good at heart." There is no doubt in my mind that evil exists in our world, that each of us has within us the potential for evil. I feel we are kept from doing evil by grace and love. My faith is sustained by the power of the human spirit to be guided by our vision of goodness and mercy and compassion.

John Westerhoff in his book *Will Our Children Have Faith?* compares the different stages of faith to the growth rings of a tree. Each ring is complete and whole; a tree with one ring is as strong and good as a

tree with many rings. Our faith grows and expands with the proper nourishment, experiences, and interactions. We acquire more rings to our tree in a slow and gradual manner. As our tree grows, it doesn't eliminate rings but maintains all that has come before, enabling us to add new elements and new needs.

May our lives be blessed with faith communities that

sustain hope,  
expand vision, and  
encourage pilgrimage.

—Bobbie Nelson



I remember clearly the picture of religious faith painted for me by many in my childhood. Faith was a total, unquestioning belief in religious precepts that denied experience and contradicted expectations. It was the essential antidote to all rational processes. "Those with faith can move mountains," I was told. "It is only your lack of faith that limits your power." My parents did not endorse this view, but I do not remember their articulating an alternative of their own. The whole concept that in order to be considered a religious person I had to accept without question teachings that had no credibility haunted me throughout my growing-up years.

Yet somehow I could not let go of feeling myself to be a religious person. Faith had to have a new image. Faith began as the simple assurance within me that the sun would indeed rise for another day. I had faith that even though I might only catch glimpses of them, there were basic principles operating in the world about me that I could count on. When I watched the sand in an hourglass, I might not know exactly which grain would drop next, but indeed the grains would flow in a consistent way from the top to the bottom, and it would always take about the same amount of time for the top glass to empty.

Faith grew to include the conscious belief that I could make decisions of my own, that I could own my own soul, that I was not a spiritual marionette. My

faith is not solely logical or rational, and though it may guide and direct me, it is not a set of blinders.

It is striking to me now to read some of Angus MacLean's concepts of faith, concepts that he expressed in his writing some fifty years ago. He wrote, "Faith catches up all the dynamic qualities of the soul that guide and direct. . . . Faith is not born solely of logic and reason. . . . Faith is . . . not only a summation of all; it goes before and abides . . . as a discipline and as a creative principle." I feel quite at home with his ideas; I would be happy to see them developed further for incorporation into religious education materials today.

Faith has been important to me as a religious adult. I have ventured and risked on that basis and have had my faith strengthened as a result. I have reached out to dying friends and been accorded some of the most profound experiences of my life. The simple act of bathing a friend as she lay in a fever at the last stages of her cancer provided a depth of relationship between us that I could never have anticipated. We exchanged almost no words; our experience transcended their power. Without faith, I could never have undertaken such an act of love.

As our three daughters have grown to young adulthood, we have had faith in them expressed as an abiding trust and a willingness to support their endeavors. Parenting has certainly been a process of faith for Bobbie and me. While our faith has been constant, our roles have continually changed as our daughters matured. In return, they have had faith in us, sharing times of joy and tragedy as well as the everyday circumstances of their lives. We have truly companioned one another on a faith journey, which has extended from their infancy to their adulthood. Of course, I have made many mistakes, but as I look back, I have no regrets.

I have come a long way on my own faith journey. I now find the statement in Hebrews 11:1 that "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," to be that of a welcome fellow traveler, a statement that has meaning for my own life.

—Chris Nelson

# SESSION 5

## Faith

Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when dawn is dark.

—Rabindranath Tagore

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### Goals

- To explore and clarify one's feelings about the word *faith*
- To define what faith means in one's life
- To recognize and respond to faith questions that children might ask

### Materials Needed

- Newsprint
- Markers
- Masking tape
- Pens and pencils
- Copies of Handouts 8 and 9, Quotes on Faith and Reflections on Rituals and Celebrations
- Display materials

### Preparation

- Read the session and divide leadership responsibilities with your co-leader.
- Photocopy Handout 8, Quotes on Faith, and Handout 9, Reflections on Rituals and Celebrations.
- List on newsprint the questions in the Focus on Faith activity and the Homework activity.

## SESSION PLAN

### Opening

#### 15 minutes

1. Welcome participants and gather the group in a circle. Light the chalice using the Tagore quote at the beginning of this session.
2. Invite people to share a question, an experience, a memory, or an event of the past week that made them think about this program.

### Focus on Faith

#### 25 minutes

1. Divide participants into groups of not more than four.
2. Distribute Handout 8, Quotes On Faith.
3. Ask people to take a few minutes to read the quotes silently.
4. Post these questions, which you have listed on newsprint:
  - Which definitions spoke to you?
  - Which definitions agree or differ with your ideas about faith?
  - What are some of the faith questions you have asked?
5. Invite discussion in the small groups.
6. Regather the large group, and invite participants to share briefly some of the ideas, questions, and feelings raised in the small groups. Acknowledge discomfort with faith language if it is raised in the group. Encourage participants to find language with which they are comfortable to describe positive feelings or experiences they have had.

### Focus on Language

#### 30 minutes

1. Have participants again form groups of four or fewer. These can be the same groups as in Activity B or different groups. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and a marker.
2. Ask people to write in their notebooks a definition of faith that is meaningful to them.
3. Invite participants to share their definitions in the small groups.
4. Ask the small groups to develop a consensus definition of faith, or if consensus is not possible, a list of points of agreement and disagreement. Have them record these on newsprint.

5. Regather the large group and ask participants to share the consensus definitions or lists of agreements and disagreements. Post the newsprint sheets, and allow plenty of time for discussion.

### **Focus on Sharing**

#### **20 minutes**

1. Have participants return to the same small groups as in the Focus on Language activity.
2. Invite people to share briefly from their writings on faith, or from their memories of a faith experience.
3. Hand out newsprint and markers, and ask the groups to brainstorm three issues/questions/concerns that children have that relate to faith.
4. Invite the small groups to share these lists in the large group.

### **Focus on Questions**

#### **20 minutes**

For this activity you can choose to keep the whole group together or divide participants into small groups or pairs. Read a question from the list of questions children ask in the Focus on Sharing activity. Give participants a few moments to think about it, and then have volunteers answer the question as if a child was asking it.

### **Homework**

#### **5 minutes**

1. Explain that the next session focuses on ritual and celebration.

2. Post the following questions on newsprint. Invite participants to consider these questions and to write their reflections in their notebooks.
  - What has been the role of ritual and celebration in your life?
  - What are some of your favorite celebrations and/or rituals? Why are they important?
  - In what ways have celebrations and/or rituals strengthened your bonds with family, friends, and communities?
3. Invite everyone to bring something to share for the closing celebration such as a poem, reading, food.

### **Focus on Writing**

#### **5 minutes**

Give participants a few minutes to reflect and write in their notebooks an insight or affirmation from this session.

### **Closing**

1. Read #693 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, a reading by V. Emil Gudmunson.
2. Sing together "Spirit of Life," #23 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.
3. Distribute Handout 9, Reflections on Rituals and Celebrations, and invite participants to read it for the next session.

## Handout 8

### Quotes on Faith

If there is faith that can move mountains, it is faith  
in your own power.

—Marie Ebner von Eschenback

They never fail who light  
Their lamp of faith at the unwavering flame  
Burnt for the altar service of the race  
Since the beginning.

—Elsa Barker

I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in  
human beings.

—Pearl S. Buck

Ye must have faith. It is a quality which the scientist  
cannot dispense with.

—Max Planck

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete  
sense in any immediate context of history; therefore,  
we must be saved by faith.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

How does your faith help you navigate water's power?  
It keeps you grounded.

—Marion Wright Edelman



## Handout 9

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### Reflections on Rituals and Celebrations

I did not grow up in a family that celebrated many times. We did the usual Christmas, Easter, birthday, Thanksgiving. We also had two special meals—on March 17th, St. Patrick’s Day, we had a boiled dinner, and on the Fourth of July we always had salmon, new peas, and potatoes. However, since having children of our own, our celebration list keeps growing. The more celebrations we have, the more come around.

There is in our storage area boxes for different celebrations. They are treasures that we keep adding to—a collection of ornaments from friends, plus the ornaments we give each of our children at Christmas. When they have their first Christmas tree away from our home, they will bring with them the ornaments collected over their growing-up years. There are Easter eggs and valentines collected from many places. There are decorations for birthdays, Halloween, and the Fourth of July. We use candles for all kinds of special occasions along with special tablecloths and colors. It does not take much to get us to turn a day into a special one. A recent gift of a red plate that says This is Your Day gets used for special occasions. I wish that I had seen or found a special plate earlier in our children’s lives.

When I meet with a couple to plan their wedding, I work hard to help them speak about their relationship. I want the ceremony to be personal—a reflection of their uniqueness and the specialness of their relationship. I am impressed with the seriousness with which so many people take the ceremony. In a recent ceremony, the couple used pieces from their past religious traditions, and we wrote some words that talked about how they were bringing two religious traditions to their new life together. A wine glass used by several generations takes on special qualities in a wine ceremony used to seal a couple’s vows. At a recent wedding, the bride’s family, all singers, formed a circle around the bride and groom at the reception and sang to them. At the same wedding a collage of pictures was gathered of the bride and groom from childhood to the present. It created a special focus. When Heather attended her cousin’s wedding in Sweden,

each family attending brought special greetings and wishes to the bride and groom at the reception. These are wonderful ways to affirm one of the most significant life passages.

When each of our children went off on some significant journey—college, Peace Corps, long periods of travel—we prepared a bag (not too large) of small gifts: balloons, a favorite candy bar, a favorite tape or bar of soap, a book, money for ice cream, stamps or a phone card, to name a few. The instructions were to open the gift when you needed one; it was their choice. It turned out to be on days when they felt lonely or down, on days when everything was going badly. This has become an important ritual in our family.

Pressing leaves between wax paper is a family tradition. When fall comes, you are likely to get one in the mail from wherever someone happens to be.

Chris made paper snowflakes with and for our children. When Joy was hospitalized at age three, he made many snowflakes for her room. Several years later, at age ten, she made snowflakes for my father’s room as he lay dying, a passing from one generation to another in reverse. What happened in that room during the week was a real celebration of life. All of our children were close to him. During the week they brought ice cream because he could eat it, but also because it was an enactment of what he had done for them. Heather gave him a teddy bear because she knew it would make him feel good. Each time they went to the store, they looked for something to put in his room that would remind him of them and how important he was to them. I have used this as an illustration on many occasions of how to help our children say good-bye and to be able to celebrate and remember the significant moments in the life process.

In their book, *Children of Joy*, Elizabeth and David Dodson Gray write, “Our celebrations have a double quality. They are simultaneously an act of memory looking backward, an act of anticipation, living in the present . . . when we diminish or neglect either this remembered past or its celebration of joy in the

present, our celebrations become mere shadows, hollow and sterile.”

In recent weeks a friend and parishioner dying of cancer decided to plan his memorial service. We talked about his life, what he wanted to be said, what he hoped would be remembered. He named favorite music and poetry, people he wanted to have speak, and indicated that he wanted a time for sharing and for lighting candles.

His family has a tradition of each person lighting a candle and saying something to the person whose birthday, graduation, new job, or whatever is being recognized or celebrated. This service was the focus of much of his conversations until a couple of weeks ago when his mind could no longer focus. On Monday I got the call that he had died. Next Monday we will participate in the service. We will celebrate, and we will know the meaning of Kahlil Gibran’s words, “Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.”

Ritual celebrations give meaning to our lives; they provide us with stories and memory; they provide continuity from one generation to another; they provide us with roots and wings.

We are made for celebrating, and in turn, celebrations make us. Our families and faith communities would lose their sense of connectedness to the past—its history—without the shared stories and celebrations. Our shared story, both painful and joyous, connects us to the community of memory that gives birth to hope and a transcendence of the spirit.

May our lives be blessed with rituals and celebrations that affirm the significant moments in our life pilgrimages.

—Bobbie Nelson



Family celebrations were not frequent when I was growing up, but they were important to me. When I recall holidays like Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July, I remember them most as a time for gathering of relatives—grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. There was a warmth of spirit at these occasions that made things different from visits at other times. What made the difference that we children sensed immediately? No one had to tell us it was there. I believe I knew even then that these celebrations marked some kind of passage. They all required

work and preparation. They all had their stories and rituals. They were looked forward to from an early age.

Celebrations have been an important part of our own family’s life. Many memories begin with “Remember when . . .” and go on to pick up the story of a family celebration. As time has gone by, traditions have grown and strengthened. For example, supper on Christmas Eve has come to be a special occasion with its own foods and simple rituals, a celebration that has evolved over a period of years.

Halloween was a favorite holiday in our daughters’ growing up. They loved to come up with ideas for costumes, which Bobbie, with some help from me, then got to construct. The best part, though, was getting the house ready. We made decorations of crepe and construction paper. We baked cookies and doughnuts. We made candy. We set up pitchers of cider and juice and baskets of apples and other fruit. Finally, we would be ready for whoever came to our door. And they did come. It was more like an open house for kids than the usual trick-or-treat routine.

The year we moved, the trick-or-treat scare changed all that. Neighborhood kids who would think nothing of having a snack or a meal at our house had strict instructions: “Don’t touch anything that wasn’t wrapped at the factory.” The celebration was over. Sometimes an unforeseen change in the community can make continuing a tradition impossible.

Our family’s move to Maryland in 1974 was not easy. Grandparents, friends, school, and church were all left behind. A familiar story. Like others, we, too, adjusted, but for many years we celebrated the anniversary of our move by eating out at the first restaurant we had gone to shortly after our arrival. It was a time to take stock of memories, to reflect on where the last year had taken us, and to think a bit about what lay ahead.

Pets were an important part of our family life from the time our daughters were little. Among the pets were rabbits, guinea pigs, mice, parakeets, ducks, raccoons, a chinchilla, hamsters, gerbils, a skunk, and a dog. When one of them would die, a solemn burial in the backyard with a few shared memories and other last words was an important ritual. Last January our family dog of some 12 1/2 years died. We had presumed that we would have her remains cremated, but somehow that didn’t seem right. So, on a chilly, rainy



January day, we dug a grave for our dog. Once again we had a burial with time for remembering and saying a few last words. We all felt afterwards that we had made the right choice, although it was certainly not the easiest alternative.

When our oldest daughter Heather was in Sierra Leone, West Africa, with the Peace Corps, she introduced her neighbors to some of her own traditions. In her village, birthdays went by almost without notice. When she discovered it was the birthday of one of the children in her neighborhood, she would bake a small cake in an improvised oven over her three-stone fire. There was no frosting, but she had some small candles and would put one on the cake. Needless to say, it wasn't long before the children were reminding her when there were only a few days remaining before their birthdays. They weren't going to take any chances.

She also carved a pumpkin to make a Halloween jack-o-lantern. Pumpkins there never lose their green color, but it was handsome just the same, and the glow of the candle inside delighted everyone. She found herself moved by the universality of our response to the symbolism of light. I'm sure her celebrations were remembered long after she left the village.

I am struck by the bonds that our celebrations have made. They have provided opportunities to acknowledge significant events, large and small, in a meaningful way. It is not the size of the occasion that makes it important; it is the realization that we have crossed a threshold with memories behind us and new opportunities ahead.

—Chris Nelson



# SESSION 6

## Rituals and Celebrations

Rituals and celebrations give meaning to our lives. They provide us with stories and memories; they provide continuity from one generation to another. They provide us with “roots and wings.”

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### Goals

- To acknowledge the importance of ritual and celebration in our lives
- To identify ways to bring our insight and learnings into our everyday lives
- To celebrate our time together
- To experience closure

### Materials Needed

- Newsprint
- Markers
- Masking tape
- Chalice
- Candles and matches
- Envelope, writing paper, and stamp for each participant

### Preparation

- Read the session and decide how to divide leadership responsibilities with your co-leader.
- Make arrangements for special refreshments if you choose.

## SESSION PLAN

### Opening

**15 minutes**

1. Welcome participants to the circle. Light the chalice with the Nelsons' quote at the beginning of this session.
2. Invite participants to describe briefly a ritual or celebration that is very important in their lives.

### Focus on Ritual and Celebration

**20 minutes**

1. Divide participants into groups of not more than four.

2. Invite people to share with one another from their journal writings or memory about ritual and celebration.

### Focus on Spiritual Experiences

**20 minutes**

1. Still in small groups, ask people to brainstorm and record on newsprint ways that the family and the congregation can nurture the spiritual lives of our children.
2. Regather the whole group to discuss the ideas generated in the small groups.

### Focus on Passwords

**15 minutes**

1. Read aloud “Generation to Generation” from *Wisdom of the Sands* by Antoine de St. Exupery (Handout 3).
2. Invite participants to write in their notebooks a list of three or four passwords that they want to nurture in their families.
3. Then ask participants to choose one password and write a few sentences about how they can create opportunities to share that word in their families.
4. Invite people to share some of their passwords with the large group.

### Focus on the Future

**10 minutes**

1. Hand out writing paper, envelopes, and stamps.
2. Give the following instructions: Write a letter to yourself sketching out a plan of what you are going to do in the next six months to increase the spiritual life in your home and family.
3. When people are finished, have them put the letter in the envelope, seal and address it, and give it to the leader to mail in three or four months.

## Closing Celebration

### 40 minutes

1. Bring the group together in a circle.
2. Light the chalice.
3. Invite people to share what they brought for the celebration such as food, readings, pictures, stories, or poems.
4. Give each participant a small candle.
5. Invite participants to speak in turn around the circle sharing one thing they are taking away from their time together. The first person lights her/his candle from the chalice. After speaking, she/he passes the flame to the next person, candle to candle.
6. Sing together "Spirit of Life," #123 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

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## Internet Resources

*Spiritual Parenting*

<http://www.spiritualparenting.com/newsletters/index.html>

*The Natural Child Project*

<http://www.naturalchild.org>



# NOTES

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