

**FROM THE HIGH HILL**  
**A Tapestry of Faith Program for Adults**



**BY ANNE ODIN HELLER**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)**

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## **In Appreciation**

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## **PREFACE**

Before I moved to northern New Mexico, I faithfully attended the chapter retreats of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. I always looked forward to those weekends: to the collegiality, the learning, the support and affirmation. Yet for me, the most moving moment occurred when we settled in after dinner to listen to an Odyssey, the spiritual and life journey of a dear—and frequently older and wiser—ministerial colleague. The Odyssey presenter's story was often amazing, smart, and funny, sometimes heart wrenching, and frequently surprising, but never dull. One colleague, using a photo process that transferred pictures to cloth, made a quilt of pictures from her life and hung it on the wall as a backdrop to her presentation. One colleague used slides; another used music extensively. Some presenters passed photos to highlight people and places as they unfolded their story. Each presenter used different words to narrate a journey all their own and each life story spilled into the appreciative room. After the presentation, the audience had a chance to ask questions of their colleague. There were always questions.

As I listened to each year's Odyssey, I wondered how it would be to share mine. When my turn came, the writing was challenging. I told a friend it felt like writing a blend of a journal and a

psychoanalytic report! Part painful revelation, part satisfying insight, and part beloved rich memories, ending in a kind of closure.

Although I was over sixty when I wrote my *Odyssey*, I was mindful of something I had been told just after my fiftieth birthday: The most important question you can ask yourself before you reach fifty is, *What do I want to do with my life?* And the most important question after you are fifty is, *What do I not want to leave undone?* This question informed my writing process and the reflections that followed. After I presented my *Odyssey*, I sat down and made a list of the things I did not want to leave undone before I died. Then I set about doing and crossing off things on my list. What a great feeling! I wrote a book. Terrified, I rafted down a whitewater stretch of Oregon's McKenzie River. I had a couple of very difficult conversations, one successfully, one not. I moved to northern New Mexico and designed and built a home. I haven't learned to tap dance yet, and may never, but I am learning, bit by bit, about the mysteries of logic and mathematics. My *Odyssey*-writing process turned out to mark a passage for me into elderhood. It was a profound experience.

When I talked about the experience with contemporaries, I discovered that others found the idea intriguing: "That sounds like something I'd like to do!" "I'd like to try that!" "I've always thought about writing my life and leaving it in a book for my children—I just don't know how." I decided to create a process that would enable Unitarian Universalist elders to engage in the same rich experience of mining a lifetime for stories and wisdom, and preparing it to share with others in a supportive community. *From the High Hill* presents that process.

I envision congregations acknowledging the *Odyssey* writing experience as a life passage and finding ways to honor this passage in the worship and community life of the congregation. While Unitarian Universalists have a variety of ways to observe and honor life passages for children, youth, and young adults, few observances recognize the life passage to elderhood. Unitarian Universalist congregations are full of spiritual and intellectual seekers, many with gray and white hair. The Bible tells us, "Gray hair is a crown of glory." This resource is for the gray and white crowns among us.

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# CHAPTER 1 - GETTING STARTED

There is a central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a [person], a town, a building or a wilderness... The search we make for this quality, in our own lives, is the central search of any person, and the crux of any individual person's story. It is the search for those moments and situations when we are most alive. — Christopher Alexander

When Black Elk, a Lakota tribal leader, looked back as an elder on the "happiness and sorrow" of his dramatic life, he referred to his view as from "this high hill of my old age." This program is an opportunity to reflect on our life's journey from atop such a high hill, survey the distances of our lives from every direction, and craft an Odyssey that we might share what we have experienced.

Each life is special and interesting. Each of us, if we so choose, might mine the history our life, rediscovering the story of our personal journey in order to better learn what life has to teach us. This resource provides a process for exploring and writing your life's journey, your Odyssey. It provides a guide for two facilitated weekend retreats for a group of six to ten people, one before the Odyssey-writing begins and the other for Odyssey preparation. It also provides a participant handbook—a guide for collecting memories, selecting what is important, writing and presenting an Odyssey, and reflecting after the presentation. It offers

suggestions for congregational recognition and for continued engagement with those who wish to examine the far reaches of a lifetime, and in so doing, find more of its meaning.

## GOALS

This resource will:

- Provide a process to help participants mine the history, stories, and wisdom from their life experiences and journey
- Provide activities to build a covenanted group to support each participant's Odyssey preparation and presentation
- Offer guidance for Odyssey preparation and presentation
- Suggest ways for individual participants to extend the experience
- Suggest ways for congregations to mark this passage in the lives of elders.

## GETTING STARTED

*From the High Hill* is a guide to personal journey in a group setting. It involves two facilitated retreat weekends, Friday evening to mid-day Sunday, with a month in between for participants to write their Odysseys. The first weekend focuses on building a supportive group and exploring personal history and spiritual journey; participants are given ways to identify what is important in their lives, organize their memories and wisdom, and write their Odysseys. During the writing

interlude, participants collect and select stories and memories and do their writing, using suggestions from the participant guide. At the second weekend retreat, participants present their Odysseys. When all Odysseys have been presented, participants begin to identify next steps, such as creating a list of "What I Do Not Want to Leave Undone." The resource includes information for congregations that wish to recognize Odyssey writers in the worship and community life of the congregation, and suggestions for adapting the materials for uses outside of a group retreat format. It concludes with Odyssey excerpts from participants in the original incarnation of this program, and an appendix with useful sample forms and letters.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

### **Size of the Group**

The group should comprise six to ten participants—eight is ideal—not including the facilitator. A group of this size is large enough to include diversity of perspective and experience while still small enough for participants to build trust and intimacy. It has the added advantage of fitting smoothly into a weekend retreat schedule. The primary advantage to engaging in a group, rather than individual, process is that the input of others is likely to broaden and deepen each person's work. Other people's reactions and ideas can point in directions participants may not have thought of exploring, and that can be very rich indeed!

## **Age and Gender of Participants**

There can be real differences between a person of fifty or so, who is still working, who may still have a child at home, who may be changing careers, and whose body has not quite begun to experience the vagaries of aging, and a person of seventy or older who is truly retired, living on a fixed income, and experiencing both the pleasures of leisure and the discomfort of creaking joints. Consider that people born in the late 1920s, the 1930s, the 1940s, and the 1950s have been formed by very different experiences and events. A person who experienced the Great Depression and World War II will bring a different perspective than one who was a young adult during the turbulent 1960s. Some people will prefer to be "in their own generation" and others will enjoy a diversity of experience and perspective. Decide whether your High Hill group will be close in age or span more than one generational cohort of elders.

Similarly, High Hill groups that have participants of a single gender will be different from groups with diverse gender expressions. Consider gender composition when shaping the group.

Discuss group composition with those who are engaged in the planning process, and define the parameters of your group. What group composition is most likely to stimulate interest? Which do you personally prefer? Why?

## Time, Energy, and Commitment

Be sure that participants can commit to the entire program and process. Simply stated, the commitments are:

- to be present for and participate fully in the two weekend workshops, arriving on time and staying through the closing ceremonies
- to create a written Odyssey in the interval between the weekends.

Time required for writing will vary, because each person will research, organize, write, and edit their Odyssey at their own pace.

Following the path of memory and life story can be like working with a knot of string that needs to be sorted out, unwound, and rewound; sometimes a pull creates new knots which have to be untied. Following the thread of the mysteries of a life is a bit like following the Greek goddess Adriane's thread into the Minotaur's maze. The journey may have dark and bewildering moments, but there can be resolution and light at the end. Writing an Odyssey requires intention, attention, and a belief that the end results will be worthy of the effort. Encourage prospective participants to ask themselves:

- How long can I take for this project? Am I willing to work on it until I finish?
- Between the two workshop weekends, how much time can I give to writing?

- Am I interested in sharing, and willing to share, such personal writing with peers?
- Am I interested in the question, "What do I not wish to leave undone?"

Every participant will need a printed copy of the Participant Guide or access to it online. The guide sets the tone for the Odyssey project. It serves as a reference during the writing interlude and as a resource after the group process is over, for individual participants to creatively extend the project.

## FACILITATORS

Why have a facilitator who is not a group participant?

There are many good reasons, but the very best one is that it is extremely difficult to be a facilitator *and* a participant. Facilitators who are not participants can help the group set guidelines for the equal use of group time, track the amount of time each group member uses, and intervene and/or mediate if there are conflicts or misunderstandings within the group. A facilitator is there to plan and describe activities, to move discussions along, and to see that timelines for an agenda are honored, that fair attention is paid to each person, and that the group honors appropriate boundaries and covenantal agreements.

The facilitator may also be asked to be responsible, directly or indirectly, for making arrangements such as registrations or reservations, conference room set-ups,

gathering program supplies, conducting evaluations, and so on.

## Choosing a Facilitator

There are several possibilities to explore. People interested in participating in the program or congregational leaders interested in sponsoring it may be familiar with skilled facilitators. A religious professional or an experienced lay facilitator may be possibilities. Your UUA district staff may know of ministers or other religious professionals who are not currently serving a congregation and might be interested in facilitating *From the High Hill*. You might form a "search group" to contact and interview prospective facilitators. Point any potential facilitator to the *From the High Hill* resource online or print them a copy. If your group or your congregation will engage a paid facilitator, discuss fees and dates, and document your agreement. When preparing to meet with prospective facilitators, consider:

- Who will go to the meeting?
- Have you provided *From the High Hill* to the prospective facilitator ahead of time?
- Have you prepared to present the program, including your goals for the congregation and for participants?
- Have you prepared questions for the prospective facilitator?

- What support can the facilitator expect from the congregation and/or its professional staff?

Take notes on what you have agreed to do—and not to do. Keep a copy for yourself, and send one to the person you met with. Don't forget to enclose a note of thanks for their time!

## Notes for Facilitators

If you have been invited to facilitate a High Hill group, congratulations! Or you may have decided to organize a group as the facilitator. Again, congratulations! It's a wonderful privilege to be invited deeply into other people's lives; to be deemed worthy of their trust; to bear witness to their history; to hear who and what they are and to learn how they became that way. You have an awesome responsibility, not to be an expert or a guru, but to be present to the people of your group.

To facilitate, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is to "render easier the performance of (an action), the attainment of (a result); to affect facilitation for, promote, help forward (an action or a process)." Facilitating is not always easy. Each person in your group, whether they know it or not, is embarking on a journey to explore the landscape of their lives. Some may, at the last moment, choose not to come; some may turn back. Most, however will take the whole journey, traveling in a small supportive company with you as guide. Your role is to keep things moving and create spiritual and emotional safety for the journey.



You will guide the group in making a covenant that establishes how people will work together and be together.

However, tangles, problems, and difficult behaviors can sometimes emerge in a group setting, even among well intentioned people who care deeply for one another. Feelings and discomforts may be stirred that reflect a person's past. In the group setting, a participant may infer "permission" to ask or say something they would not under ordinary circumstances. Your task is to recognize such moments. Gently but firmly, invite the group to honor the covenant they have made.

A good facilitator:

- Works with the agreed-on covenant and sets boundaries as needed
- Models caring and supportive conversation
- Encourages participants to explore new or unexplored ways of interacting
- Invites participants to "try it another way"—if necessary, in private conversation—if their behavior is disruptive to the group process
- Calls participants to profound listening
- Invites the group to be supportive rather than judgmental, affirming rather than critical.

In the 13th century, poet Jelal ad-Din Rumi wrote: "Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing there is a field. I'll meet you

there." Rumi understood the possibilities of human interaction, and that the real conversations begin in the absence of judgment. This liberating concept is well worth discussing with your High Hill group as you begin your time together.

## **About Co-facilitators**

It is a great thing to have two facilitators: You bring two points of view, two personalities, and two sets of ears and eyes and hearts to a process. In mixed gender groups, having people of different genders co-facilitate can build trust and deepen the level of support in the group. Here are some suggestions for smooth co-facilitation:

- Go through this resource together, deciding who will do what.
- Agree who will take care of specific preparation tasks, such as composing letters, managing registration, managing reservations, purchasing supplies, and making sure electronic equipment is available
- Decide who will be responsible for facilitating which activities
- Decide whether, if one person is facilitating an activity, the other may join the conversation
- Decide who will open and who will close each day
- Decide who is responsible for opening and closing ceremonies for the entire

program. If group members share in this responsibility, will one of the facilitators work with them, or will they be on their own?

- Decide if one or both of you will be available to small groups as they work. In what way will you circulate?
- Agree how you will interact, if at all, with participants during the writing interlude and following the program.

## **PUBLICIZING THE PROGRAM AND FORMING A GROUP**

Identify and approach potential participants, explaining the program and inviting them to take part. Be inventive, using words and/or pictures you think best describe what is going to happen. Think about why people might want to participate. Explain that this program and the process of writing an Odyssey help us better understand who we are by helping us understand who we have been.

People may say, "Well, it sounds interesting. It sounds like fun, but what will I really get out of all that work?" Here are some possible responses:

- You will prepare your own story to read, relive, edit, add on to, and share
- You will have a documented life story to pass on to your family and future descendants
- You will understand your own story in a deeper and broader way. Whether an

Odyssey takes the form of a journal, a paper, a video or a letter, it's a unique opportunity to celebrate your life with people you care about. You may inspire others to follow in your footsteps

- You will be invited to consider those things you wish to accomplish before you die, and may even develop a plan to do them.

When you publicize the program, make sure you include information about the time commitment required, and the specific age range and make-up of your proposed group.

One way to get the word out is an attractive flyer. Find a person who is good at graphic design ask them to create a flyer you can print and distribute. You can also distribute the flyer online. Your graphic designer might even like to join the group!

Flyers that grab attention while being informative are spacious and uncluttered. Here are some considerations:

- Use font sizes large enough to catch the eye from a distance, as from a bulletin board
- Use artwork that has relevance to the workshop
- Include this important information: goals, briefly stated; dates, time, and places for the two retreats; cost; facilitator name(s); registration information; information about transportation, including carpools if you

are willing to help arrange them; and, whom to contact for more information

- Choose your paper color for maximum readability. Ivory and light tan are good choices.

There are many ways to get the word out.

Here is a list to get you started:

- Include a flyer in the Order of Service
- Put a flyer on your congregation's bulletin boards
- Put a notice in your congregation's newsletter
- Ask your minister to announce the program from the pulpit
- Mail the flyer, with a hand-written invitation on it, to all the qualified elders in the congregation, and to any others you would like to invite
- Use social media to publicize your program.

If you choose to seek participants beyond your congregation, try these additional suggestions:

- Post flyers in local cafes, bookstores, coffee houses, or other venues where they will be seen
- Put an ad in a local newspaper
- Submit an announcement to your local public radio station
- Send flyers to nearby congregations.

## From the High Hill for Existing Groups

There may be an existing group in your congregation, such as a men's group, a women's group, a Seniors group or another affinity group that would like to do *From the High Hill* as a project. Because group members already know one another, issues of trust and familiarity are likely to be easier. Existing groups will likely be enriched by their shared experiences in the program. If you are a member of an existing group in your congregation and wish to present them with the idea of doing this program, consider these steps:

1. Circulate printed copies of *From the High Hill* among members of your group or invite them to view the resource online. Tell them you are interested in having the group consider doing the program.
2. Discuss with your group the pros and cons of taking on the program. Bring newsprint and markers to the discussion and record people's ideas. Consider these questions:

- Are most or all of the regular members of our group willing and able to take part? What if some are not?
- Is this group the right size for the program? If not, do we want to divide into two groups? Include people who are not part of our group?
- If we include others, whom will we invite? When you all know one another, it may be best not to include

newcomers into the group. The nature of the subject matter and the work you will be doing involve a high degree of trust. It can be difficult for a newcomer to break in.

- What dates might work for us? When should we begin?
- Who is willing to serve on a committee to organize the program? Recruit a facilitator?

Although someone in your group may be an excellent facilitator, they should not be asked to facilitate this program. The person who facilitates is not, should not, and cannot be a member of the group. Facilitators need to be able to focus their full attention on the program activities and agenda and on the process and progress of each individual.

### **Committed Couples in the Group**

If there are committed couples in your group, talk with the couples about guidelines for the program. Invite them to talk with one another about expectations and work out an agreement for their interaction in the program. Ask them to reach agreement on these questions before beginning the program:

- Will we participate in the same group or in different groups (possibly at different times)?
- Will we read one another's work while it is in process? Will we comment or offer suggestions?

- How will we respond to one another if one of us is distressed or emotional about a particular story or topic? Will we talk privately? Refrain from commenting? Comment only as part of the facilitated conversation?
- Can we each refrain from disagreeing publicly with the other if our memories of events and people differ? Will we also refrain from private disagreement?

Invite the couple to agree to consult with the facilitator if they need help sorting things out during the program. Recommend that they not be peer writing partners and that they avoid being in the same breakout groups during the retreat weekends.

### **Suggestions for Small or Large Congregations, Districts, and Clusters**

If you are part of a small congregation, you may wish to invite another congregation in your area and invite them to join you in offering the program. You might consider opening your group to people who are not part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. If you are a member of a larger congregation, there may be enough congregational interest and staff support to present two or more groups that will run concurrently, or to offer a number of groups at different times. One person, likely a congregational staff member, would be responsible for the oversight of these groups, convening their facilitators regularly in a peer support groups.

To accommodate a large number of participants, whether from a single congregation or from a district or geographic region or cluster, recruit enough facilitators to ensure that there is one for each group of six to ten people. You could have a large number of participants meeting simultaneously, if you have a facilitation "staff" serving basic groups and break out spaces to meet comfortably and privately. In this case, you will need to have staff meetings in preparation for your program and to acquaint facilitators with the materials, exercises, and discussion guidelines and challenges. Plan to involve all program participants in activities such as worship services, openings, and closings.

## **FINDING A LOCATION**

Retreat centers have distinct advantages for this program. Meals and refreshments are provided for you; dishes and clean-up are taken care of; meeting rooms that are apart from living and dining arrangements are provided; social spaces are available; comfortable sleeping spaces are available as singles or to be shared; break-out spaces are usually available for small groups to work in. In a retreat setting where participants stay overnight, a group quickly develops opportunities for building trust and intimacy that are peculiar to an "away from home" environment. While some retreat centers are upscale, most are accessibly or even modestly priced. Some offer historic charm, special amenities available to guests, or a spectacularly beautiful setting. Some require a

certain amount of travel while others may be closer to your location.

Begin your selection process by deciding how far it is feasible to travel, what kind of a setting you are seeking, what price range is appropriate for your group, and what kind of living arrangements you prefer. Find out if meals are provided on site, because dining out will literally eat into the time the group needs to accomplish its work. Ask people, including your congregational or district staff members, for suggestions. Search online; most good retreat centers have informative, attractive websites. Make phone calls to narrow your selection to the most suitable options.

Make arrangements to check things out in person before you commit. See if you can have a meal there and tour the facilities and grounds. Find out if a retreat center staff member will be working with you to ensure that your experience will be pleasant and fulfilling. Prepare for your visit with information for the staff about your group and its needs and any questions you have. Pay attention to accessibility issues for those who have obvious or not so obvious needs for accessible accommodations; use these questions:

- Is the site easily navigated by those with mobility impairments?
- Is seating comfortable and plentiful? Are there tables to write on?
- Are there quiet spaces available for break-out groups?

- Is there a microphone available for participants' use?
- Is the site reachable by public transportation or by shuttle? If not, are you willing to help arrange carpools?
- Are there bathrooms attached to bedrooms?
- Are there single or double rooms, as opposed to dormitories?
- What food choices are available? Can they accommodate vegans, vegetarians, and people with food allergies?
- A music player for the music (e.g., CDs) you plan to use
- Lined pads of paper and writing implements
- 3x5 self-adhesive note pads, one for each participant
- A journal to give each participant
- A copy of "[Odyssey Writing: A Guide for Participants](#)" (included in this document) (Chapter 3 of this resource) for each person. You may choose to put this in a small three-ring binder or a pocket folder.

## SUPPLIES

Here are supplies you will need for the retreat weekends:

- Centering table with chalice, candle and matches (if desired, and allowed at the site) or an LED battery-operated chalice, a table cloth, and bouquet of fresh flowers
- Newsprint pads—the self-adhesive variety are the easiest to handle, though more expensive
- Water-based marking pens, preferably odorless, with broad tips
- Masking tape (or push pins if you are using a bulletin board)
- Ice water, iced tea, juice, coffee, and other refreshments

## REGISTRATION CONFIRMATION INFORMATION

Once a participant has registered, they should receive a warm welcome letter with written confirmation and details about participation in the program. Invite your facilitator to co-write and co-sign the letter, especially if your facilitator is a religious professional in your congregation. Send the letter with a packet which should include a map to the retreat center, a list of what to bring, and a detailed agenda and workshop schedule.

If couples will participate, send separate letters and packets to each partner.

Chapter 7 of this resource has two sample letters. [Resource 2](#) (included in this document) is a letter to send participants in a High Hill program that involves two weekend retreats. [Resource 3](#) (included in this document) is a

letter to send participants whose group will meet locally, without overnights.

# CHAPTER 2 - FIRST TWO DAY RETREAT: A GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,  
Make of our lives a study... — Adrienne Rich, poet

## PREPARATION

Read through the plans for the entire weekend retreat. Where there are options, select the best one for your group. Most activities include the entire group. Some call for participants to work alone or to share, as they wish to, with others. Learning objectives, preparation, and description are provided with each activity.

The retreat begins with getting acquainted, establishing a covenant, and building trust and community among group members. The retreat then moves to preparing participants to write Odysseys that are deep and wide. On the second day, you will give each participant a copy of "[Odyssey Writing: A Guide for Participants](#)" (included in this document) " (Chapter 3) to guide them in the interlude between retreats.

Plan which activities you will do and prepare an agenda to post. Include mealtimes and other breaks in the written agenda. A natural break between the first full day and the second falls after Activity 6, Values Clarification.

You may plan some activities for the first retreat that invite participants to bring and share certain items. If this is the case, let

participants know well in advance what they will need to bring. Here are examples that show the kinds of instructions you might want to include in a letter or email:

- We'll be creating a photographic "Hall of Fame." Please bring one photograph of yourself as a child, one as a teenager, one as a young adult in your twenties or thirties and one as an adult in your forties or fifties.
- Dress casually and comfortably. If you have one, bring a tee-shirt to wear that expresses a core value or belief of yours. Bring more than one!
- There is a line from the song "Today" which says "You'll know who I am by the song that I sing." What is the song that you sing that most tells people who you are? Bring a recording of that song, especially the version you love. Let me know if you know how and are willing to create a CD from the various songs participants bring.
- Bring a calendar so you can set dates with your Odyssey-writing partner.

Most High Hill groups enjoy having worship once or twice a day, in the morning and/or evening. If you are planning to have daily worship services, it is wonderful to invite participants to help plan. Invite them to bring favorite readings or songs, and musical instruments if they would like to share some music. Plan to bring a collection of your own readings and worship service materials,



including a few copies of *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook. You may wish to consult your minister or religious educator for suggestions. One suggestion from the first High Hill group is "Layers," a poem by Stanley Kunitz, which they used to frame the entire program. The poem was read by the facilitator on the first evening of the first retreat weekend, and then as a unison reading for the closing on the last weekend.

If you will invite participants to help plan worship, create sign-up sheets to post listing each time slot (e.g. Saturday morning, Saturday evening, and Sunday morning) with lines for two or three people in each slot. The facilitator and/or group organizer should prepare a brief, evocative, and simple opening, and invite participants to help create other worship experiences.

It's a great gift to bring reference materials and place them on a table for participants to look over. Don't forget to put your name and phone number in all of them and ask that they be returned. Consider creating a handout of resources such as books, movies, and music used during the program. If your meeting site will have equipment for showing movies, you might bring a selection of films for participants to view "after hours."

Prepare a roster for participants to take home. Circulate a copy early, so participants can make corrections if they need to.

Purchase a journal for each participant, or ask them to bring their own. They can be large or

small, with blank or lined pages, and can be as simple as a school copy book. Make copies of "[Odyssey Writing: A Guide for Participants](#) (included in this document)" (Chapter 3) and place this guide in a small three-ring binder or a pocket folder for each participant.

## **FLOW OF THE FIRST TWO-DAY RETREAT**

### **Welcoming and Presentation of Journals (45-60 minutes)**

When each participant arrives, tell them where they will sleep during the retreat and give them time to settle in. Give each a journal (if they have not been asked to bring their own). Invite them to create a name tag, and direct their attention to the retreat agenda you have posted. Tell participants the journal is theirs to use as they choose—write as the spirit moves, or make notes during the retreat activities. Journals are intended to "get the juices flowing" for Odyssey writing and to encourage participants to think about their completed project. Encourage them to at least write notes and thoughts in the journal each evening.

If your group arrives the night before the first full retreat day, you may want to do Activity 1, Getting Acquainted in the evening and begin with Activity 2, Establishing a Covenant, in the morning.

### **Activity 1: Getting Acquainted (45-60 minutes)**

*Objective:* Participants will get to know a bit about each other and build possibilities for intimacy and trust.

*Preparation:* Choose one or two get-acquainted activities from the options described below. Gather supplies you will need to lead these activities.

*Description:* Lead the group in one or more of these activities.

1. *The Name Game* lets the entire group know just a bit about each person. Ask participants to gather around a table or sit in a circle. Invite them to think about their entire name—first, last, and however many middle names they have. Invite each person, in turn, to share all of their names and explain where those names came from. Use your own name as an example. Then suggest that people volunteer when they wish, or go around the circle, each sharing in turn. Example: "My name is Anne Odin Heller. I was named Anne, with an E, by my red-haired mother, after Anne of Green Gables. My middle name, Odin, is my birth name, and is Latvian in origin. When I was small, I liked to think it was because my father was king of the gods, but actually it means "moth" in Latvian, and "one" in Russian. My last name, Heller, is a chosen name. I chose it when I left my twenty-year marriage and became a single woman. I chose it from my mother's side of the family. It seems that my maternal grandparents had an ancestor in common, the Rabbi Yom Tov Lippman Heller, who wrote an essay on the rainbow and a polemic against Christianity!"

2. *This is a pencil* encourages participants to learn all participants' names (especially in a smaller group) in a very short time. Invite everyone to sit in a circle or around a table. Hold up a pencil, saying: "This is a pencil. We'll be passing it from person to person. I'll be the first and the last person. I'll begin by giving my name, saying: 'My name is Anne, and this is a pencil.' I'll give the pencil to the next person in the circle, who will take it, give their name, and say: 'My name is Peter, and Anne says that this is a pencil.' And the next: 'My name is Dolores, and Peter says that Anne says that this is a pencil.' Each person, in turn, takes the pencil, adds their own name, repeating the names of the people who preceded them, and so on, until the pencil returns to the leader who finishes by repeating each name. Then, invite volunteers to try to say all the names in the group.

3. *One thing I am proud of* is a great way to learn about something that is important to each participant. Invite people to write on a slip of paper one thing they are very proud of that most people don't know about them. Don't forget to do one yourself! Ask participants to fold up the paper and put it in a container, such as a hat or a bowl. Put the container in the middle of the table and invite each person to draw out a slip of paper. Invite participants, in turn, to read the slip of paper aloud, and say who they think wrote it and owns the accomplishment. If the guess is correct, invite the writer to take a bow while the group applauds the accomplishment. If the guess is incorrect, ask others for suggestions. Once the

writer owns their accomplishment, invite them to say more or answer others' questions about what they wrote.

4. *Pair interviews* offer two people who don't know each other a way to begin an acquaintance and provide introductions for the whole group. Invite participants to form pairs, suggesting that each person pair with someone they don't know well. Invite each person to briefly interview their partner and prepare to introduce them. Allow five minutes for each interview, a total of ten minutes; signal the pairs to switch roles at the five-minute mark. Ask for a volunteer pair to go first in introducing each other.

5. *Drawing silhouettes* takes longer, but is great fun! It is a great exercise to loosen up the group, and to laugh a lot. You'll need a lot of space for this activity—floors, outside porches, grassy lawns. You will also need wall space to display the finished silhouette drawings. Invite people to pair up with someone they don't know well. Give each pair two lengths of pre-cut paper and a selection of broad-tipped, washable marking pens. Invite pairs to find a spot that will accommodate the length of the tallest partner and give these instructions:

- One person lies down on a sheet of paper. Their partner traces their silhouette, including hands and feet and head.
- The second person lies down and has their silhouette drawn.

- Each person writes, inside the feet of their own silhouette, where their feet have been; inside their hands, what their hands can do; inside the head, what they like most to think about; on the stomachs, what foods they like; by the heart, what they love; by the eyes, what they have seen.

Encourage participants to be playful and creative. When each has finished writing in the silhouette, invite partners to ask each other questions about what is unclear, or might have been left out, and so on. Invite people to sign their name at the bottom of their silhouette and post all the silhouettes. Take time for an art show. Invite participants to walk around, look carefully at each drawing, and ask one another follow-up questions. Spend a little time discussing the process with the whole group. How did it feel? Do they have questions for or about anyone else? What did they learn? Any surprises?

## **Activity 2: Creating a Covenant (30 minutes)**

*Objective:* Participants build community and establish agreements for their time together.

*Preparation:* Consider guidelines you would like included in the covenant for the group and jot them down for reference. Post blank newsprint. Have markers nearby.

*Description:* Invite participants to create a covenant that lists agreements for how they will treat one another during the program. Say,

"We all want to be positive and encouraging with one another as we begin this Odyssey-writing journey. What specific agreements would help ensure that we all experience this group as positive and supportive?" Invite participants to name specific behaviors, using "we" language, while you record them on newsprint. Where possible, turn negative suggestions into positive ones, with permission of the person who made the suggestion. For example, change "We will not have side conversations while other people are sharing" to "We will listen when others are sharing." After the group has brainstormed points they would like included in a covenant, add additional points you consider important. Possibilities include:

We will remember that each person's story is their own, and each person has a unique perspective on their own experiences.

- We acknowledge that each of us will be taking personal risks in telling stories and talking about our journeys. We will be accepting, supportive, nonjudgmental, and kind to one another.
- We will pay careful attention to the way comments and questions are phrased so as to be supportive and kind.
- We will address disagreements and misunderstandings promptly and openly. We will honor the guidance of our facilitator in resolving any conflicts that might arise.

When the list seems complete, invite participants to ask or offer clarification of any points. When all are in agreement with all points on the list, ask each person to verbally assent to the covenant.

### **Activity 3: Building Trust (30-60 minutes)**

*Objective:* Participants deepen community and build trust.

*Preparation:* Choose an activity from the options given and prepare to lead it. Two variations of the Making Choices activity require a recording of the Simon and Garfunkel song "El Condor Pasa" and a music player; for one variation, you will need to make a list of either/or choices to offer participants. For the Trust Walk activity, each pair will need a cloth for to cover one partner's eyes.

*Description:* Lead one of these activities:

1. *Making Choices* (variation 1). Invite participants to listen to the song "El Condor Pasa," paying careful attention to the words. Say, "All of us have made choices in our lives, some simple, some difficult." Invite everyone to move to the middle of the room. Invite those who would rather be a hammer to go to one end, and those who would rather be a nail to the other. Invite one or two people in each position to say why they chose as they did. Next, invite those who would rather be a forest to go to one end, and those who would rather be a street to the other. Again, invite one or two people at each position to explain their

choice. Continue with about a dozen more choices (examples: omnivore or vegetarian, day person or night person, introvert or extravert). Gather the group together and invite participants to share something about a difficult choice they have had to make in life.

2. *Making Choices* (variation 2). Play "El Condor Pasa" and invite participants to form groups of three or four. Invite each person in the foursome to take five minutes to share an important choice they have made in their life; allow about 25 minutes for each quartet to complete their sharing. Invite the entire group to come together and share comments and insights about the process of recalling difficult choices and hearing one another's stories.

3. *Making Choices* (variation 3). Invite participants to sit in a circle. Ask each person in turn to share an experience in which the choice they made changed their life.

4. *Trust Walk*. Have participants pair up. Give a cloth or scarf to each pair and invite one partner to cover their eyes with the cloth and allow the other person to lead them by the hand on a ten-minute walk, taking care to ensure the safety of the person who is putting trust in them. Then, have partners trade roles. After the walks are finished, invite participants to form a circle and talk about what it was like to trust someone with your sense of control and well being.

## **Activity 4: Profound Listening (45 minutes)**

*Objective:* Participants practice good listening, to enhance the retreat group experience and any interviews they may conduct while preparing to write an Odyssey.

*Preparation:* Plan a "hot" or controversial conversation topic you will introduce, perhaps one concerning politics, sexuality, or religion. Write these instructions for paired conversations on newsprint and post:

- Person A talks for five minutes and Person B listens, focusing on hearing what A is really saying.
- When A is finished, B tells A what B heard, not expressing an opinion about the topic, but simply reporting back
- A gives B feedback about the report back ("Yes, that's right, that's what I said." Or, "No, that's not quite it; what I was trying to say was... ")
- B reports back again on what A said and A gives feedback about the report.
- A and B reverse roles.

Write three sentence completions on a piece of newsprint and set aside:

- I was surprised that...
- I learned that...
- It was difficult for me to...

*Description:* Introduce the activity with these or similar words:

Listening is an art that can be learned. You probably know a person, or people who are good

listeners. Here are some common practices of good listeners: They focus their full attention on you. They lean into a conversation. They respond verbally or non-verbally to what you say. They focus on what you say, not what they plan to say next. They affirm what you say, and answer your questions directly.

These are skills that can be learned and practiced. Being a good listener will help enhance interviews you might have with friends and relatives as you prepare to write your Odyssey. Here's an exercise to help you practice being a good listener.

Invite participants to pair up with someone they have not worked with before and don't know well. Introduce the conversation topic. Say that partners will take turns expressing their opinions on the topic, following the process you have posted. Tell groups they will have 20 minutes to practice good listening in pairs. Remind them that their goal is to hear another person's viewpoint, not to change another person's opinion. Watch the time; after 10 minutes, suggest partners switch roles if they have not done so. After the pairs are finished, invite the large group to reconvene. Post the sentence completions and invite participants to complete them in their journals. Allow five or ten minutes for writing, and then invite reflections or comments. Ask: What did you learn about listening, either as the speaker or as the listener? In what ways will good listening skills enhance the Odyssey experience for you personally and for the

group? Ask for suggestions about how to listen more deeply; how to avoid critical or analytic questions and responses; how to affirm and encourage the person who is speaking.

Conclude with these or similar words:

Profound listeners leave you feeling that what you are saying is important to them. To listen profoundly as a person is telling you their life is to give a compliment of the highest order. Profound listening to friends and relatives who will bear witness to your own life as you interview them encourages them to share more deeply.

### **Activity 5: Saying a Radical "YES" (30 minutes)**

*Objective:* Participants practice finding ways to say "yes" and affirm others.

*Description:* Introduce the activity using this story from the experience of the author of this resource:

At my seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry at the University of California's Graduate Theological Union, we had a collective commitment to saying YES. It was based on the notion that every person grew and prospered and trusted others more when encouraged by "radical" YES-saying. This meant we were always trying to think of ways to affirm and support one another, even, or especially, when we disagreed or were concerned that what the other was doing was wrong. It was sometimes difficult to be nonjudgmental. It was often difficult not to jump in with a contrasting or opposing opinion.

Say:

Let's practice radical YES-saying in our group this weekend. What would it mean if we were to do that? How would we do that? Let's take some time to heighten our sensitivity and become more willing and skillful yes-sayers!

Lead participants in a conversation. Ask: What are the possible effects of yes-saying? What good, or ill, could it do? What happens when, instead of saying yes to a person, you are critical, or say no? Allow about 15 minutes for discussion. Then invite the group to brainstorm ways to say yes. Go wild!

### **Activity 6: Values Clarification — Individual Reflection and Journaling (60 minutes at least; if possible, the remainder of the afternoon)**

*Objective:* Participants discover and name values that have shaped their life experiences.

*Preparation:* Write the processes (prizing, choosing, and acting) and sub-processes from the book *Values Clarification* on newsprint and post.

*Description:* Introduce the activity by describing the seven sub-processes involved in valuing, as described by Sidney B. Simon in his 1995 book, *Values Clarification*:

#### **PRIZING one's beliefs and behaviors**

1. Prizing and cherishing: Is this a value I truly prize and cherish? In what ways do I do that?
2. Publicly affirming, when appropriate: Am I willing to publicly affirm this value? How have I done that?

#### **CHOOSING one's beliefs and behaviors**

3. Choosing from alternatives: Did I choose it freely from among alternatives? What were they?
4. Choosing after consideration of consequences: What were the consequences of choosing this value? Name one.
5. Choosing freely: Did I choose it freely, or "inherit" it from my parents? A peer group?

#### **ACTING on one's beliefs**

6. Acting: How have I acted on my belief? Give an example.
7. Acting with a pattern, consistency, and repetition: Am I consistent in acting on this belief? In what ways?

Invite participants to use this approach to identify personal values and beliefs, both long-standing and emerging, and reflect on how they live those values. Ask participants to list in their journals five to ten of the values and beliefs that are important in their lives. Invite them to assess their list using Simon's processes and sub-processes, which you have posted, asking themselves questions about each value on their list and writing or making notes in their journal as they wish. Allow a half hour for this part of the activity. Then invite participants to consider how their values might inform their approach to understanding and writing their Odyssey. Invite participants into a time of quiet reflection. Slowly ask these questions:

- How do your values thread through your story? Which are most important?
- How and when did you begin to hold your values?
- How have they influenced your life and behavior?
- Have the values you affirm and uphold changed the course of your life in any way? How?
- Do your primary values center around your family? Friends? Your spiritual life? Politics? Your work?
- How have your values impacted your work or vocation—which is it, work or a vocation? Do your values shape how you respond to that question?

Invite participants to list in their journals three values they might measure their life by. Say: Spend some time, perhaps the remainder of the afternoon, considering the impact of these values on your odyssey, or life story. Journal about the times you have "walked your walk" and acted on your values. Are they a central part of who you are and what your story has been about? If not, why not? As you write, do you find other values emerging that surprise you? What are they? If there are central points, stories, or crossroads in your life that introduced you to the values you live by, write about them.

Invite participants to find comfortable space for reflection. Tell them that they may choose after some time of silent reflection and writing to find another person with whom to share their

thoughts and practice profound listening, although this is optional.

### **Activity 7: This I Believe (two hours at least; if possible, the entire morning)**

*Objective:* Participants reflect on their beliefs and heartfelt commitments and write a credo statement.

*Description:* Introduce the activity, saying: Writing a credo, what you believe or what you set your heart to, can be an enlightening experience. Robert Fulgham, the Unitarian minister who wrote *Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, tells us that his book had its origins in seminary, in a semester-long credo writing class.

Suggest this process for writing a credo:

- Take your journal with you to a quiet and comfortable place. Write down what you believe, in a stream of consciousness, without thinking too hard about it. It might be a list, or it might be free form, a flow of consciousness, with no order at all. If you are stuck, refer to your list of values.
- Put your writing aside for a while and enjoy some reflective time.
- Look at your writing again and begin to organize your thoughts. Your credo is beginning to emerge.
- Write a draft without trying to edit and put it aside again.



- Return to your draft and edit what you have written for content and form.
- Put it aside again before editing your credo a final time. Polish it, and work on the poetry of the language as well as the content.
- Share your credo with a peer, taking turns reading to each other and practicing profound listening.
- Discuss your experience of the process. Ask your partner "Does this sound like me? Or does it surprise you, and if so, how?"
- After our first weekend retreat is over, put your credo aside for a few days. Then look it over again, and make corrections if you need to. Choose someone who is important in your life and share your credo with them. Ask them the same questions you asked your partner: "Does this sound like me? Or does it surprise you, and if so, how?" Consider also sharing it with a peer partner from the group.
- Edit it one last time!

Say:

You may choose to use your credo as a preface to your Odyssey, or as a handout in your presentation. Or, you may choose not to include it, but simply use it as a frame of reference for your writing.

## **Activity 8: Drawing Your Life (60 minutes)**

*Objective:* Participants consider events and turning points in their lives and make a visual representation in order to understand where they have come from, where they are now, and where they are going.

*Preparation:* Decide whether you will offer instructions only for the time line, only for the tree, or both of these options. You will need a roll of paper to give participants six-foot sheets for time lines, and/or sheets from a newsprint pad for trees. Set out a good selection of drawing supplies such as crayons, markers, pastels, and color pencils.

*Description:* Invite participants to draw their lives to understand where they have come from, where they are now, and where they are going. Explain that they may draw either a personal time line or a tree that explores the roots and branches of their lives. Invite them to choose paper and drawing materials and find a quiet spot with good light.

Offer these specific instructions in your own words:

*For time lines:* Select several different colors to use. Place the sheet of paper on the floor, or a table. Draw a horizontal line across the middle of the paper. On the far left of your time line, write the year of your birth. At the far right, write the current year. Divide the paper into life decades from birth to the present (i.e. Birth to 10 years, 10 years to 20 years, and so on). Write the decades across the top. Within each decade, note:

- The major events of your life, for example schools, geographic moves, marriage, accomplishments.
- The most important people in your life during the decade
- The cities and states and countries you have lived in
- Events in the news, in politics, in the world that affected you
- Experiences you had that affected you
- Role models, mentors, and people you admired.

Take the time line home with you and keep it on a wall, updating it and adding to it as you write your Odyssey. You may even choose to use this time line as a backdrop when you present your Odyssey.

*For tree histories:* Take a moment to think about different kinds of trees you have known and loved: pine, oak, aspen, sycamore, palm, willow, elm, and so on. Ask yourself, "If I were a tree, what kind would I want to be?" Draw a tree to represent yourself, including roots, branches, trunk, leaves, and so on. When you have finished, record the events of your life where they belong on the tree. What people or events or places are at the "roots" of your life and contributed to your growth? Which people, events, or places "branched you out?" Which people, events, or places belong to the trunk, the center of your being? What parts of you are in the leafy treetop, striving to grow? Take your life tree home and post it on your wall for

a week or so, and add to it as you wish. You may even choose to use this tree as a backdrop when you present your Odyssey.

### **Activity 9: Planning for the Writing Interlude (at least 90 minutes)**

*Objective:* Participants consider options for organizing the writing project and plan how they will use their time between retreats.

*Preparation:* Make copies of "[Odyssey Writing: A Guide for Participants](#)" (included in this document) " (Chapter 3) for all participants. Review the guide so you will be prepared to answer questions. In consultation with participants, prepare recommendations for peer writing partners during the interlude; consider logistical factors (such as location and transportation) as well as personal compatibility factors.

*Description:* Distribute copies of "Odyssey Writing: A Guide for Participants." Review and explain its contents, answering questions. Explain that the Odyssey writing project they will undertake between retreats has two phases: the collection phase and the writing phase, and that the guide has suggestions and options for both. Tell them that they need not be limited to the suggestions in the guide, but should rather be inspired by them to prepare, write and present the Odyssey in their own unique style. Make recommendations for peer writing partners.

Invite participants to create a work plan for the writing interlude, figuring out whom they would

like to contact and what mementos they would like to gather. Invite peer partners to meet with one another and review those plans, offering profound listening as well as the encouragement of radical YES-saying.

### **Activity 10: Constructing an Armature for Your Odyssey (30 minutes)**

*Objective:* Participants explore ways they could structure their Odyssey.

*Description:* Introduce the activity with these or similar words:

If you have ever written a term paper, or thesis, or a speech, you've had some practice figuring out how to structure your work before you write. The dictionary tells us that an armature is a framework or structure for supporting sculptures, as in building clay. It can also be the framework for other things, as in the structure of a piece of writing. The virtue in developing or constructing an armature before you begin writing is that the armature will provide structure and direction to help guide your work.

Invite participants to share this imaginary scenario:

Imagine that you are sitting in front of a television set, watching the best episode ever seen of a favorite television program. It's exciting. It's terrific! But you are hungry. What you would really like is a toasted English muffin with butter and jam. Commercials! You have just the space of time of the commercial break to prepare your muffin and get back to your chair in time for the next segment of the episode.

Ask participants to take out their self-adhesive notes and a pen or pencil, and write every single step of getting that muffin ready—each step on its own self-adhesive note. Then, invite your whole group to shout, "THE MUFFIN IS READY!" Invite a volunteer to post all the steps, in the correct chronological sequence on a wall or other large space. Read them aloud.

Invite participants to examine their own notes and identify steps that were missed: Did you take the butter out of the fridge before you unwrapped it? Did you take the lid off the jam before you put jam on the knife? Did you slice the muffins before you toasted them? Did you open the bag before you took a muffin out to toast?)

Point out the message of this scenario: For a story to make sense, it needs to be explained in a logical order.

### **Activity 11: Planning and Holding a Closing Worship (45 minutes for planning/20 minutes for worship)**

*Objective:* Participants work with the facilitator to plan and offer the closing worship.

*Preparation:* Make sure you have supplies on hand that participants may wish to use: a chalice and matches or an LED battery-operated chalice, music, hymnbooks.

*Description:* Work with participants to plan a brief closing worship. The worship should incorporate references to the events that took place and affirm and encourage participants in

their coming writing process. Considerations include:

- How long will the closing be? Fifteen or twenty minutes is usual.
- What music will be used and in what form? Participants and facilitators might include their own songs.
- Is the group a group that enjoys singing? If so, you may wish to include a hymn or song.
- What objects and decorations will you use for the room? What focal point or centering table decorations will you use?
- Will you present participants with a flower or a small gift of some kind?
- How will you include participants? A unison reading? An invitation for each person to express in a very few words?
- How will closing words encourage the participants to "go forth and write!"?

# CHAPTER 3 - ODYSSEY WRITING: A GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

## INTRODUCTION

"Tell me, O Muse, of that ingenious hero who traveled far and wide" begins the first sentence of Homer's *Odyssey*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "odyssey" as "a long series of wanderings to and fro; a long adventurous journey." What follows in Homer is an aging soldier-of-fortune's epic tale, filled with adventures, hardships, gods and goddesses, demons and monsters, beauty and wisdom, and in the end, peace. It is the story of a life.

Every life has a story; every life story is a hero's journey. Each one of us has dreamed dreams and set goals, met demons and angels, learned some hard and some graceful lessons, and confronted unanswered questions as we approach the fullness of our days.

The exploration of your life's journey and the story you want to tell about your life will be intensely personal. As each person's life journey is different, so will be your expression of what you discover. One person's journey may result in a diary, another in a book, yet another in a video. One person may introduce their journey at a brave and intimate evening with family and friends. Another's journey will remain essentially private, tied with a broad, smooth ribbon, placed in a special envelope, stored in a drawer and in the heart, forever

belonging only to the one who wrote it. Whatever the result, it will be a hero's story!

This program invites you to share your journey in a particular way—through the writing of an *Odyssey* that you share with the High Hill group. You may choose also to share part or all of it with others, including people in your family and in your congregation. This guide offers suggestions for how to organize and collect information, stories, and mementos and how to discern what to include in your story. It also offers guidance on how to structure your *Odyssey*, how to write and edit it, and how to prepare it for presentation at the second High Hill retreat.

## ORGANIZING AND COLLECTING MEMORIES, STORIES, AND MEMENTOS

To incorporate all the possibilities might mean writing a book! And you may *want* to write a book! But for the purposes of this program, you will need to make selections from among your memories in order to present your *Odyssey* within the allotted time frame, which is 45 minutes for your presentation followed by a half-hour for questions. The choices you make as you research and prioritize material can determine the structure of your *Odyssey*.

How can you best decide what to include? On what will you base your choices? In the retreat setting, the first High Hill group explored personal values and beliefs; that is one way to organize what is most important in your life and decide which stories to share.

There are a number of other ways to organize your thinking about your life story. Here are some suggestions:

### **Mining Resources and Ideas from Photos, Slides, Videos, and Scrapbooks**

Life story resources and ideas may be waiting in images from your life. Begin mining your story by digging out old family photographs, slides and boxes of memorabilia. Spend time sorting through them, perhaps playing a recording of some beloved music as you explore. Do you know who everybody is? Check with siblings and relatives to identify unfamiliar people and places. Choose your favorite images, and arrange them in chronological order. Look at each one for a long time, remembering when it was taken, who was there, and why it is important to you. Did you take the picture, or did someone else? Who? What events preceded and followed the taking of each picture? How old were you? What was your life like? Use the same process with home movies and videotapes, choosing the best segments, even editing them into a single film. Remind yourself of the stories that surrounded the videotaping. You may want to invite family members over and go through pictures, slides, and video together!

Perhaps as a child, a teenager, or an adult you kept scrapbooks with important artifacts from your life: tickets, newspaper clippings, programs, and so on. Explore them with a friend or family member, and talk about the

people, events, and times that were important to you.

Ask yourself what the process of looking, remembering, and sorting tells you about your growth and development as a human being. How have you changed since the earliest picture was taken? What were the critical events, or turning points in your life? What precipitated the changes? Did anyone witness these changes? Is that person (or people) still in your life? You may be surprised, or even shocked, by what you find in pictures, slides, movies, and scrapbooks. Or you may find that it is all as you remembered and expected. In either case, there is something about your life that is to be learned.

### **Using Job Ladders as a Resource**

Job ladders are another way to look at your life's trajectory. Here's one way to do it: On separate self-adhesive notes, write every job you've ever held, from babysitting and mowing lawns to your recent and current. Also note any volunteer jobs you have taken on. Arrange the jobs in chronological order, then look them over, making corrections or additions. For each job, ask yourself:

- How did I get that job? Did I apply for it? Was it referred to me?
- Did I need references? Who were they?
- What did the job entail? What was my salary?

- Why did I choose to leave, or was I let go?
- Who was my supervisor? Was the person a good supervisor for me?
- Do I still have friends from this job? Do we still trade reminiscences about that time? What might they remember?
- If I could do it over, how might you approach this job differently?

Ask yourself some general job-related questions, perhaps answering in your journal:

- Who was the best supervisor I ever had? Why?
- What was the most difficult job I ever had? The most fun?
- Which job was my favorite? Was it a vocation?
- Did my work require me to move from one place to another? Was that hard? Why?
- Did I turn down any jobs that might have changed the direction of my life? Why? Any regrets?

Get together over a cup of coffee with people who were a part of your work life. Reminisce. What do you remember, what do they remember? How are the recollections similar? If people remember things differently, how can you follow up and try to find the answers?

Sometimes the kind of work we do, or a particular job, is central in the story of our

lives. We develop skills sets that move us toward a particular line of work—or if we are lucky, a vocation—to which we are particularly suited by abilities, temperament, and values. Sometimes a job radically alters us, perhaps changing our personal life, or unexpectedly pushing us in a completely new direction. How has the path of your life been affected by your work? A little? A lot? Not at all? Was your work directly or indirectly a catalyst for change at any turning points in your life? How?

## Remembering Places You Have Lived

In the song "This Ole House," vocal artist Rosemary Clooney sang these lyrics:

This ole house was home and  
comfort  
As they fought the storms of life.

Listen to this song as you begin your exploration of places you have lived. Find it online if you do not own it.

Some of us have lived most of our lives in just one house or apartment. Others have moved a few times; some much more often, including this program's author, who has lived in 43 places! Some of us grew up in an ancestral family home and may still live in the same community where we grew up. Some of us have always lived in cities, or rural places; some have always lived in the United States, or always in the same geographical region; others have lived in diverse kinds of places. List, in chronological order, every place you have ever lived. For each place, ask yourself:

- What do I remember about this place?

- Did I like or love living here? Why or why not?
- Who did I live with?
- Did I sleep in my own bedroom, or with whom did I share? What was my bedroom like? How was it furnished?
- What was my favorite place to retreat to, to sit, to read, or to daydream? Draw a picture or floor plan of your favorite room.
- Who were my friends in the neighborhood? What kinds of things did we do together? With whom am I still in touch?

- If I could combine the best qualities of those three, how would it be?
- What do all these places, or most of them, share?
- Do I have a preferred "scale"—town, city, country?
- Do I have a preferred environment—mountains, desert, forest, ocean?

Ask yourself some general questions, perhaps answering in your journal:

- If I lived away from home for a time, perhaps in a dorm, with relatives, or at a summer camp, what was that like?
- What was my first "adult" living place?
- In what homes did I raise children? If there has been more than one place, which is their favorite? (Ask them!)
- Am I now in a "rest of my life" home? How did I come to choose it?
- Would I rather be somewhere else?
- Which three places have been my favorite homes? What qualities did they have in common?

Ask yourself: What is my sense of place? Where do I feel most at home? How do these places' commonalities or differences inform me as I write about my life? Have they influenced my life? To what degree?

### **Remembering People Who Were/Are Important in Your Life**

More list-making! List the people who were or are an important part of your life *other* than your immediate family. Your list might include friends, teachers, role models, colleagues, mentors, and people you have mentored. Noting that length of association and age are not the only indicators of importance in your life, write in your journal something about the three people in your life who had the greatest influence on you. Describe how they influenced or changed you. How would your life have been different if you had not known them? Are they still living? Are you still in touch with any of them? Do you know where they are? Seneca said, "Thank someone for being that someone." Take the opportunity to reconnect and express gratitude. If possible, connect with the three by phone, email, letter,



or even in person. Tell them how they influenced your life and thank them. Invite them for a cup of coffee or a meal if they live nearby. Catch up on each other's lives. Ask them what they remember about you, who you were when they first met you, and any changes they have noticed in you. You may want to record the conversation (with their permission) or take notes you can review later.

## **Interviewing Your Family and Oldest Friends**

Involving your extended family and long-time friends in (re)collecting your history can be a wonderful experience, full of reminiscence and revelation!

You might start with one person at a time. Or, you might invite all your children or siblings to a gathering. With permission, record the conversations for yourself or as part of a collective family history to leave to your children and grandchildren. Ask people to talk about the most enjoyable, the most difficult or challenging, and the most moving times you have shared as a family or as friends. Ask them:

- What is your favorite family/friendship memory?
- What is your favorite family/friendship tradition?
- What do you think was the hardest time for our family/our friendship?

- What was the happiest time?
- Who would you like to thank, and for what?

Particularly for family members, you might ask:

- Who was your favorite relative, perhaps now deceased? Why?
- Are there any unsolved mysteries in our family story? What are they?

You'll find that one memory may trigger another, and another, and another, all woven together like threads in a family or friendship tapestry. Stories may move or surprise you. If you have chosen to explore memories in a group, you might follow up by interviewing one person at a time, especially if there were, or are, unresolved difficulties among the group or very personal experiences that the two of you have shared. One-to-one sessions will be more intimate.

If you have unresolved difficulties with a friend or family member who is important in your life, consider trying to reconcile. A wise Unitarian minister, Rev. Ted Tollefson, said, "In every relationship worth having, there is always a way back. There is no such thing as an unforgivable act, there are only unforgiving people." Plan to have a reconciliation conversation. Ask yourself: "Do I need help with this conversation? Who would be a good person to ask for help?" You may wish to include a third person, such as your minister, your therapist, or a skilled friend. Ask your friend or family member if they would meet you

for such a conversation. Explain that you are writing your Odyssey and that you want to understand what happened and your part in it, and that you will be there to listen and not to argue or blame. Then, do what you have promised to do—listen! If the person declines your offer of conversation, be gracious and loving. Express your regrets and get on with your journey!

Who were your best friends at earlier periods in your life? Are you still in touch with them? Can you get in touch with any you haven't seen or talked to in a long time? Prepare questions for them as well:

- How did we meet and become friends?
- What was life like then?
- What memories and stories do you have of enjoyable, challenging, or important moments in our friendship?

Write them a letter after your conversation, telling them what you particularly appreciated about the friendship and the experiences you shared together. Save plenty of time for those you love and are in right relationship with! What a time you'll have!

## **Mining Your Past**

The more you can discover about your past and the people and influences in it, the more interesting your research will be, the more useful to you, and the more fascinating to others. After you have spent time looking through scrapbooks and photo albums,

remembering jobs, friends, and homes, and talking with people close to you, ask yourself, "What do I want to know that I still don't know? What do I want to know more about? Who could help me find out?" Using a self-adhesive note pad, write down topics you want to explore and how you intend to find out more about that event, location, or person. Use a single note for each topic. Decide in which order you will investigate the topics and arrange the notes on a wall, window, or bulletin board. At the conclusion of the writing interlude, give yourself a gold star, real or virtual, for any questions for which you have uncovered answers.

## **Remembering What I Have Received and Given**

Use a piece of lined paper or a page in your journal and divide it into two columns. Head one column "What I have received" and the other "What I have given." Ask yourself:

- Who are the people who gave to me during my life? What were their gifts?
- How was my life affected by their gifts?
- Have I ever told them, or thanked them?
- To whom have I given? What did I give?
- How did the giving affect me?

List what you have given and received as ideas come to you. Keep your lists as free-flowing and open as you can. A sense of completion often follows thanking people for what they have given you. You may wish to

write a letter, telephone, or have a personal conversation, perhaps over a meal, with those people who have been important to you. You may decide later to send them a copy of your Odyssey, or selected pages from it, with an accompanying note thanking them for their part in your life.

## **Learning to Use Journals and Mining Existing Journals**

Your old and current journals are great sources for Odyssey writing. If you have kept journals, by all means reread them! Remember where you were and how you were as you wrote different entries. Do you remember where you were sitting? Were you happy, or angry, or joyful, or sad? Introspective? Longing? Revisiting your life is a powerful experience. You may wish to have someone in mind to talk with, if you need them. You may want to transcribe hand-written journals as a way of re-entering your life!

If you have never kept a journal and wish to begin, go for it! Writing an Odyssey may be the beginning of a journaling life! You must decide if your journal will be electronic or hand-written. Both have virtues, and it doesn't have to be an either-or-decision. You might try doing both for a while and then choose how to continue.

## **Using Your Favorite Books, Movies, and Music as Resources**

In your journal, make a list of five favorite books and five favorite movies. Ask yourself:

How recently have I read these books? Watched these movies? If it has been a long time, go back and read parts of a book or watch a well loved movie again. It has been said that the books you love to read or the movies you like to see over and over describe a world you would like to enter. What kind of a world do your favorite books and/or movies describe? What do they have in common? Take some time to think it over. Then write about it in your journal.

Favorite music can evoke similar responses. There's a line from the song "Today," by Randy Sparks: "You'll know who I am by the song that I sing." What is the song you sing that tells who you are? When did you first hear it? Do you remember who sang it? Why is it important to you? What do you think it tells us about you? Just for fun, ask your family members, or best friends what their song is, and why. Would you have guessed? What surprises you, if anything? Play or sing your song for them, and ask whether they are surprised or think the song fits you perfectly!

## **PREPARING TO WRITE**

Approaches to writing inform the finished product. You may choose to write in a "stream of consciousness" without any particular focus in mind. Or you might organize your writing around a particular theme. An advantage to choosing a theme is that it offers an entry point for personal reflection as well as discussion with others. Possible thematic approaches to the writing project include your spiritual history,

your genealogy, the influences on your life, reflections on your homes and places, and your history of work and vocation.

## Spiritual History Approach

Spirituality may be at the center of your life, whether you have held a single religious perspective during your life or explored many. Your spiritual life at twelve, at twenty, or at thirty, forty, or fifty was likely different from what it is today. You may have experimented with spiritual practices before you found right ones for you; perhaps you are still searching. A mid-life transition or crisis might have become a catalyst for you to define yourself anew. The search for personal identity, asking the question, "Who am I?" is often a central life theme, and it may even be what we define as our spiritual journey. You may have followed a path that has led toward a belief in God, or a path that led you towards agnosticism, atheism, or secular humanism. You may have come to the conclusion that the question of belief in God is not an important spiritual question for you.

Make a time line of your personal spiritual journey. In what religious tradition, if any, were you raised? Does your present belief system or spiritual practice grow strongly from those childhood roots or has it moved away from them? If you have changed your beliefs or spiritual practice, what led you to do that? Were there particular events or people who were catalysts for change in your life? Has yours been a journey of comrades, as in *The*

*Fellowship of the Ring*? Who was your Sam? Your Gandalf? Or has yours been a solitary journey? Would you like your journey to have been different than it was? How?

You might view movies about people's spiritual journeys, such as *Resurrection*, *Strangers in Good Company*, *Into Great Silence*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Shirley Valentine*, *O Brother Where Art Thou?* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

## Genealogy Approach

One interesting thematic approach to Odyssey writing is to mine your family history. You may have boxes of family letters, documents, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and journals. When your grandparents were living, you may have had conversations with them about your roots. Perhaps your parents shared family stories. Brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins may be rich sources for history and memories. Ask relatives if they are willing to be interviewed, being sure to ask permission to record the interviews if that is your intent. In advance of the interview, prepare a list of questions. What are the family mysteries or things you would like to know? If you have family photos including people you do not recognize, see if others can help you identify them. Ask relatives if they have letters from your grandparents or parents that they would be willing to photocopy or scan electronically to send to you.

Arrange your research material—documents, photos, interviews, and so on—chronologically, and *voilà!* You have a rough

outline for your Odyssey. Where there is a part missing in the story, contact people who might have the information you seek. Use the Internet to gather genealogical, historical, or cultural information. You might uncover some mysteries and you might solve some. For example, the author's father was in his mid 70s when he told her that he had had a twin brother who died at birth. Her mother and uncle barely spoke to their mother, her grandmother, for most of their adult lives, and none of their children know why.

When you write your story, you may decide to start as far back as you remember and work forward to the present day. You may choose to begin with a broad overview of your personal history, and then focus on an "era" or decade that was a turning point of particular importance. You may examine a decade at a time. Or you may prefer to organize your Odyssey another way. Be adventurous! Consider having someone in your family read your first draft and suggest additions from their own perspective and knowledge. You might view movies about family ties and remembrances, such as *Avalon*, *The Namesake*, *Moonstruck*, and *The Grocer's Son*.

## **Influences Approach**

People (and pets!) may have had great influence in your life. Brainstorm a list of your important influences: Who were your best friends in grammar school, high school, as a young adult? Have you had beloved pets?

Have you had roommates, in college or in another living situation? What neighbors were you closest to? Which teachers had the greatest influence on you? If you went to camp, were there favorite campers or counselors? Who are your best friends now? How long have you known them? Who were, and are, your mentors? Who have your work colleagues been, and how have they influenced you, if at all? Who was the best job supervisor you ever had, and why?

Lovers and spouses always touch us deeply. It has been said that you can tell something about a person by those they love. Who was your "first love?" Remember the people you have loved, how you touched them and how they touched you. Recall the beginnings and endings of those relationships. Make a list of the gifts each of those people gave you. Do you still have some of these gifts? Are there unresolved elements in any of those relationships? Could there be a way to resolve them? Would you want to try?

Organize a list of influential people by decade. How did the people of each decade change or influence your life? Who, outside your family, has known you the longest? Have they seen you change or even reinvent your life? How? You may begin to notice "threads of influence." For instance, a high school teacher might have encouraged your interest in a subject, or even a career, then a college teacher might helped you with further encouragement, and even focus. A mentor or mentors may have actually taught you, or assisted you along the way. The

author had one teacher, a speech teacher, who deeply influenced the course of her life by encouraging her to enter speech and debate competitions. You might view movies about friends, mentors and teachers, such as *The Big Chill*, *The Right Stuff*, *Peter's Friends*, *Babette's Feast*, *I Never Sang For My Father*, and *The Turning Point*.

## Homes and Places Approach

Wallace Stegner, a 20-century American writer, historian, and environmentalist, wrote "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are." Some people have lived in dozens of places; others have lived in only a few. Revisiting homes and places can be a wonderful approach to Odyssey-writing. In your journal, make a list of all the homes you have lived in and all the places you have lived. How, and how much, did each affect you? Why did you move from one place to another? Have you lived outside this country? Where? How did living abroad affect your life? Have you lived in more than one state or region? Have you preferred older or more modern places to live? Why? Are you a country person? A city person? Is your heart moved by the ocean, or the forest, the mountains or the desert? Are you living now in a place that you love? What was your favorite place to live? Why? Describe your favorite place in your journal, writing both about the inside of your home and its surroundings. Try drawing a picture or a floor plan of your favorite room, or the view out of its window. You might view movies where the sense of place is important,

such as *Under the Tuscan Sun*, *Off the Map*, *A River Runs Through It*, *Nowhere in Africa*, and *Out of Africa*.

## Vocation and Work Approach

Has your employment been a vocation for you? A job? Or some of both? Some of us have worked for most of our lives, maybe staying in one position, maybe moving from one position to another to another. We may have enjoyed our work enormously (and perhaps still do!), yet have never felt a sense of calling, a sense that what we do for a living is our vocation. Others of us have a clear sense of calling and feel deeply intellectually, emotionally, and/or spiritually fulfilled by the work we have done.

How has work life been for you? If you have a sense of calling, write in your journal about roots of your calling and how you gained skill, marked accomplishments and found (or find) fulfillment. Did you have a role model in your vocation? Why did they inspire you? If what you did (or do) for a living has been work, rather than vocation, write about what you did or didn't enjoy about it, and how it fit into the rest of your life. If you have had a taste of both "work" and "vocation" in the ways you have earned a living, what do you perceive to be the difference?

In your journal, list every job you have ever held, from mowing the lawn or baby-sitting to what you do now, or did before you retired. Do you see a pattern? Did one job naturally progress to the next? Which did you enjoy

most? From which did you gain the most? Did you stay in an unhappy or unsatisfying job over a period of time? Why did you stay? Is there some kind of work you would like to have tried? Could you still do so now? Might you give it a try? You might view movies where work or vocation is central, such as *Patton*, *Being Julia*, *Frida*, *All That Jazz*, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, *To Sir with Love*, *From Mao to Mozart*, and *Immortal Beloved*.

## **Constructing the Armature for Your Odyssey**

If you have ever written a term paper, a thesis, or a speech, you've had some practice figuring out how to structure your work before you write. An armature is a framework or structure for supporting sculptures, as in building clay. It can also be the framework for other things, as in the structure of a piece of writing.

Developing or constructing an armature before you begin writing will provide structure and direction to shape and guide your work.

As you plan your Odyssey, use separate self-adhesive notes to write a phrase for each event, person, or time period you want to include. Arrange the notes in the order in which you want to write about them. Look them over. Do you need to add any critical or connecting event, so the flow of your narrative will be smooth and seamless? Are there missing pieces? Will the Odyssey make sense to your listeners or readers? Add the notes you need, and re-order the notes if you need to. The outline you have created with self-

adhesive notes is your armature, suggesting where and how to begin and how the flow can be creative, interesting and smooth. Now you are ready to write.

## **WRITING YOUR ODYSSEY**

Here it is! The moment you've been waiting for—or dreading! The pencils are sharpened, the pens lined up in a row, the cover is off the typewriter, or the blank computer screen beckons—the writing medium is up to you. Where and how you write are your choice. Ernest Hemmingway famously stood up at his writing desk, every morning, writing by hand. Shakespeare didn't have a computer. Some writers love their typewriters, even if they "hunt and peck." Others prefer writing at a computer. An advantage to using a computer is that you can type in your outline and then fill in details later. You can also shift sentences, paragraphs, even pages, instantly, moving them from one place to another to see how they fit in the flow of your manuscript.

It is good to have a private, quiet space that is all yours to work in, where you can leave your work spread out between writing sessions, or, if you are the tidy type, clear off your desk at night so it is there, pristine and waiting for you the next day. Some people like to bring a pot of tea or a pitcher of water to their writing space. Others like fresh flowers on their desk or writing surface. Some like music as they work; others prefer silence. There's no right way or wrong way to set up your writing environment, there is only your way!

Schedules can be helpful. If you have a deadline, measure out how often you will write and what you need to do at each writing session in order to complete your manuscript on time, allowing for revisions and writing detours. Writing at the same time each day can be good discipline. You might give yourself a finite number of pages to complete each day. You may wish to keep a writing calendar; mark your planned completion date and benchmarks along the way. People who write for a living offer these suggestions, which you may find helpful:

- Set aside a particular time each day for writing.
- Write in a place that has few or no distractions.
- Set a goal for yourself, such as a certain number of pages per day.
- Have your reference materials and research notes close by while you write.
- Check form, grammar, syntax, and spelling as you go along.
- Review what you have already written before beginning a new writing session.
- Pause periodically as you write, for refreshment and/or a stretch.
- Start a new sentence or thought before you finish each writing session, so you have a place to begin the next time.
- Affirm your progress as you go.

- Every few days, put aside your writing for a while. Then, read everything you have written before resuming.
- Attend to transitions, endings, and so on, so your Odyssey will be engaging and easy to follow.
- Invite a friend to be your informal editor, reading your pages and commenting.
- Plan on doing multiple drafts and rewriting as necessary.

If you are unsure how to organize your writing time, consider your own habits and sense of discipline. What scheduling will best help you complete your Odyssey writing project?

If you are using a theme or an organizing pattern for your Odyssey, have it well in mind. Decide how you will introduce it and summarize it as well as how you will weave it through what you write. Keep in mind an old speech-writing saw: "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, then tell 'em, then tell 'em what you told 'em!"

Having an armature or outline prepared before you begin to write is really helpful, especially if you have not done much writing before. An outline or armature is a little like a trail in the wilderness: It helps you know where you have been and where you are going next in your writing, and can keep you from wandering from the story you intend to tell.



## **PAIRING UP FOR PEER SUPPORT**

During your retreat weekend, you may have chosen a partner for the writing interval. You and your partner might meet together occasionally to read and encourage each other's work. Partners might gently offer comments and suggestions, remembering that the content of each Odyssey belongs to the writer alone. Your suggestions should be supportive, and limited to how the story can be clearer.

## **REVIEWING WHAT YOU HAVE WRITTEN**

You've done it! Your Odyssey, the pages of your life, is complete. Put the pages in a drawer and leave them alone for a couple of days (don't peek!). When you are ready, fix your favorite beverage, settle in to your favorite reading space, and read it as if you were reading a highly recommended book for the first time.

First, read for content and flow. Are the transitions smooth? Is anything missing? Are any important events, people, or places left out? You may have chosen to skip over events that are central to your life, perhaps because they were too complex or too private to include. This is entirely appropriate. Just be sure you have included the events you do want in your story; ask yourself if leaving an event or a person out is the right thing to do. Omit by design, not by accident. Make sure

your opening paragraphs are strong and your closing paragraphs clearly signal the end of your written Odyssey. Use self-adhesive notes on the pages to keep track of additions or changes you want to make to your Odyssey. Writing can be hard work, as can editing what you have written. Both are well worth the effort. What you write may well be passed down from generation to generation in your family. Be sure what you write says what you want it to say.

Read your Odyssey a second time, paying attention to details like syntax, grammar, and spelling. If you are not confident doing this, ask someone you respect to do it with or for you. Misspellings and awkward grammar will distract listeners and readers. Make sure your Odyssey is in good form and ready to meet the public!

## **ADDING RUFFLES AND FLOURISHES**

### **Special Objects**

You may want to incorporate into your Odyssey presentation some of the artifacts from your High Hill retreat or from your research, such as photos, lists, time lines, trees, drawings, or scrapbooks. Gather your artifacts and rehearse your presentation, reading your Odyssey aloud. As you read, think about what you might like to share, either by passing it around or by referring to a display. Note the places where you will do this.

Time the entire presentation to make sure it fits within 45 minutes.

## **Family Shrines**

In some cultures, people worship or honor their ancestors with a family shrine. A shrine might have photos, objects, candles, incense, and flowers. You may want to prepare a family shrine to accompany your Odyssey presentation. Use pictures or objects that are especially important to you. Try locating a souvenir from each decade that is symbolic for you, putting one or more on your shrine, either at home or during your presentation to the group. If you are planning an Odyssey presentation for your family in addition to the one for your High Hill group, this could be an especially meaningful gesture.

## **Handcrafts and Visual Art**

If you are a person who enjoys handcrafts, such as knitting or quilting, or visual arts, such as photography or painting, you may want to use your own art in your presentation. If you are lucky enough to have any of your childhood projects, you may want to include them in your Odyssey presentation. In any case, take time to admire the artistic child who still lives within you.

You may decide to create your own paper mache mask to be part of your Odyssey presentation. This can be done at home by yourself or with one or more people from the workshop. It is time-consuming, but worth the effort!

Before you begin creating your mask, think about your outer persona, the person you present to the world. Then, think about your inner persona, the person deep inside whom the world rarely sees. Choose one or the other to represent with your mask, or make one mask for each. Find detailed instructions for making paper mache masks on the Internet or borrow a craft book from your library. You will need these materials:

- Something to shape your mask, such as a balloon or pieces of flexible, mesh screen and masking tape
- Plenty of newspaper, cut into strips
- A paste of flour and water (Mix one part flour with two parts water.)
- Acrylic paints, brushes, and water for rinsing brushes
- Trimmings such as glitter, feathers, twigs, and yarn—whatever you want to use (You may have some special adornment, jewelry, a precious souvenir, or another item you would like to add to your mask.)
- Craft glue
- Scissors
- Twine for hanging your mask.

Make a structure or mold on which to build the mask. Balloons or molded screens held by tape work well. Then, form the mask by laying strips of paste-coated paper over the mold, shaping it as you imagine it. Make a small hole

on each side, by the ears, so the mask can be hung when it is finished. Once the mask has been formed, put it in a safe place to dry, which may take several days. When you are sure it is completely dry, paint your mask, letting your imagination be free. When the paint is dry, decorate the mask and add any special ornamentation. Hang the mask on the wall or a bulletin board to set. Invite anyone who has joined you in mask-making to talk about their masks and what they mean. You might choose to wear or display your mask when you present your Odyssey.

### **Music**

There may be songs that were important at certain times in your life, or are important to you now. If you would like to include music in your Odyssey presentation, plan to bring recordings and a player (or perhaps a musical instrument or your own voice!).

### **Quotations**

You may have in your head, in journals, or on your bookshelves quotations that express the core of your feelings about an event, a person, or a place. Whether poetry or prose, they can enhance or highlight what you are trying to say. Think of salt and pepper: Season your Odyssey with quotations, but don't overwhelm the flavor of your own words. People will be more interested in what you have to say than in the words of others!

## **PREPARING FOR THE PRESENTATION OF YOUR ODYSSEY**

"In every end, there is a beginning," wrote T.S. Eliot. Presenting your Odyssey to others who all have engaged in a similar process offers an opportunity to see your life all over again through the eyes of others. In a sense, you reinvent yourself as a whole individual, as you reflect and write. You know yourself again as if for the first time. From that "high hill" of age, the Odyssey writer has a long view of their life—active, intentional, curious, prophetic, challenging, joyful, and, at times, sorrowful. The process of writing creates opportunities to hear from beloved family members and friends, those who have been part of your life. Presentation of your Odyssey invites others to bear witness to your journey of discovery.

### **Think about the Setting**

Take a moment to imagine the room where you will present your Odyssey. Will this be the group's meeting room at the retreat center, or a different place? What time of day will it be? Will you want the lights bright or soft? Will you use candles? Will a fire be flickering in the hearth? Will music welcome people into the room? Where will you arrange any display objects or decorative objects? Imagine your High Hill group (or later, after your retreat, your family and friends) around you. There is talk, laughter in the air, the smell of freshly brewed coffee, the scent of flowers. Imagine yourself as you move forward into the room you have

lovingly arranged, smiling at the collected assembly of loved and familiar faces.

## **Greeting People**

Think of how you wish to greet and welcome the people who will attend your presentation. What will you wear? Will you stand at the door as people enter the room? What, if anything, would you like to say to people as they enter?

## **Beginning**

You may wish to sound a bell or a chime to signal the beginning of your talk. Or, you may wish to invite someone to introduce you. Imagine taking your place in front of the group as they fall into expectant silence. Will you begin with a few informal words, or by sharing from your written pages? In either case, it is wise to practice your opening in advance.

## **Your Song**

You may wish to begin, or end, your Odyssey with your song. Plan to follow or introduce the song by explaining why it is important to you. Invite someone to operate the music player, and instruct them how and when to cue up, play, and stop the music. Before the presentation, familiarize your "DJ" with the sound system and equipment.

## **Recording**

You may wish to have someone record your presentation. Talk with them ahead of time

about the equipment, timing, and other details, and ensure that they will not be intrusive.

## **Managing Your Papers**

If you plan to stand and read your Odyssey, it is important to use a lectern or music stand to hold your pages. If you will be seated when you speak, plan to put your pages on your lap or on a table in front of you. You may wish to find an attractive folder or binder to hold the pages as you read them.

## **Slides, PowerPoint, and Video**

If you are using slides, PowerPoint, or video as part of your presentation, it is helpful to have a hand-operated remote so you can present the images smoothly. If you ask someone else to operate the machines, it's wise to give them a copy of your manuscript with cues clearly marked. Test all the equipment you will be using and rehearse the entire presentation with the visuals ahead of time.

## **Relax!**

Take time to relax so you can enjoy yourself at this wonderful time and take it all in!

## **Preparing for Questions and Answers**

After your Odyssey is shared, you will invite your guests to join in by asking questions. Decide ahead of time how you want to receive questions. Will you be comfortable responding to questions as they come? Or would you prefer to reflect a bit before answering? If you

prefer reflective time or would like some control over whether or not to answer particular questions, you may wish to provide slips of paper for listeners to write their questions and place them in a basket or bowl. You can then draw the questions one at a time, and answer them as you feel comfortable. An advantage to having written questions is that you will have them to refer to and remember afterward.

Some questions may be startling in their simplicity. You may never have thought about your life in the way a listener has. Thank the asker for that new insight! Questions that surprise and intrigue you—and which you may not be able to answer!—can be a rare gift, allowing you to view your life in a new dimension. It's fine to say, "That's a great question. But you know, I'll have to think about it before I can answer it." And then do!

Other questions, often the ones asked by family and friends, come deeply from their own hearts. They may want to know more about an aspect of your life that affected them. Even if a question brings up pain or sorrow, remind yourself that the question comes from someone's need to know the answer. Respond in a spirit of loving-kindness.

Perhaps you will be asked a question by someone who expresses a perspective that challenges or unsettles you. When such a question is asked, it is important to assume best intentions on the part of the questioner. Acknowledge that you perceive or understand things differently and then move on. The

purpose of the questions is to illuminate and clarify your Odyssey, rather than to provoke debate or discussion. On the other hand, profound listening to questions as they are asked, followed by attempting to offer thoughtful, kind answers, can enrich your presentation experience and add to your self-knowledge.

Whatever the questions and however they are asked, treat them as gifts that point the way to a deeper understanding of your life. How much you will learn from them! If you have opted for written questions, plan to place them with your manuscript to look at later and see if you would answer them in the same way.

## **AFTER THE ODYSSEY PRESENTATION**

Congratulations! You have presented your life story. You have told that life to a room full of people who support you and care about you. You have listened deeply to their questions and answered them thoughtfully and truthfully, with love and compassion. What a remarkable achievement!

After you have presented your Odyssey, put your manuscript aside and wait a bit. After a few days, review your manuscript. If your presentation was recorded, watch or listen to the recording. Looking back, what do you remember best about the experience of presenting your Odyssey? Do you perceive it differently, now that a few days have gone by? Take some quiet time to reflect.

In your journal, complete these sentences:

- I learned that...
- I was surprised that...
- I was moved when...
- I wish I had...

You may have completed the same sentences right after presenting your Odyssey. If so, compare your thoughts now, a few days later, with what you were thinking in that moment.

Put both your manuscript and your sentence completions aside and wait a few more days. If it helps you reflect, copy your sentence completions on a piece of paper and post them in your writing space or on your mirror—someplace where you can see and review them now and again.

### **What I Do Not Wish to Leave Undone**

When you decided to tell your story, you planted a seed. Through your research, writing, and telling, the tree has grown and prospered. The next step is to pick the fruit it bears. Look again at what you have learned, at what surprised and moved you, and at what you wish you had done. It is time to consider those things you do not want to leave undone.

Read your Odyssey again. Listen to or view the recording, if one was made. Do this by yourself, at a quiet time with no distractions. As you listen, watch, or read, make notes. Date a new page in your journal and head it "What I Do Not Wish To Leave Undone." Your list can be as long as you wish. Compare your list to the earlier list you made during the

retreat weekend. Have you changed your mind about any items? Which do you want to remove, and why? What would you like to add, and why?

Prioritize your list. Ask yourself:

- In what order do I wish to do these things?
- Which are the most important to me? To others?
- Which are the most urgent?
- Which will be the most fun?
- Do any of the things on this list have time-related importance?
- Do any of the things on this list need to happen before others can?
- Do any of them involve another person or other people?
- Which do I need or wish to do alone?
- How will I know when I have accomplished or completed each task? What criteria will I use?

In the course of making these lists you may hit on an item that could be life-changing. Pay attention to your feelings as you write and prioritize.

Once you have written and prioritized your list, put it in a safe place for a week or two. Then take it out, review it, and make a new list of the three most important things you do not wish to leave undone, knowing you can always go

back to the rest of your list later. On a new, empty, beautiful piece of paper, carefully write your top three priorities. Post this list in a central place in your home.

## Structuring an Action Plan

When you are ready, take the list of your top three priorities off the wall and look at it carefully. Do you want to make any changes? Make a brief plan of your intended actions, a chart naming each item and listing the dates, time, places, specifics necessary to complete that action. Your chart should list:

- *What* the action itself is—the item from your list that you do not wish to leave undone.
- *With* whom names the person or people you need to contact to complete the item.
- *How* lists any intermediate steps, such as making phone calls, acquiring materials, or doing research in order to accomplish your action.
- *When* names the date or time you intend to do something, including any intermediate steps.
- *Where* describes the place your action or any intermediate steps will take place.
- *Bring* describes what you want to remember to bring along: a photograph, an old letter, a gift you may have been given or one you wish to give, a

picnic—whatever you need and feel is appropriate.

If your priority list includes difficult or challenging conversations, or contacting people you have not seen in some time, think about what you will say to them before you call. Be candid about why you want to meet and what your hopes are for the outcome. Surprises are really not fair to other people! If the topic is a difficult one, it can be helpful to meet in a neutral setting, such as a coffee shop, where it is easier to be mindful of one's tone of voice and either of you can easily leave if you need to. If the meeting is likely to be a joyful reunion, choose your home or theirs, or perhaps a lovely spot you would both enjoy.

When you have accomplished one of your priorities, give yourself a gold star—really!—or another treat, such as dinner out with someone you love to tell them what happened and how you feel about what you have done. You may want to call a friend from your High Hill group and talk to them.

When a couple of months have passed, look again at your list. Ask yourself:

- What have I accomplished on my list?
- If I have accomplished some things, how does it feel?
- What insights or knowledge did they bring me?
- What, if anything, have I not yet completed?

- Do I want to eliminate or further postpone anything? Why?
- Do I want to add anything?

You may have discovered your list has items you do not, in fact, want to approach. Perhaps there is something you wish to add to your list. Either way, it's fine! If you are ambivalent about something, try discussing it with a member of your High Hill group or a friend who knows you well. Develop a plan for accomplishing any remaining or new items.

### **An Imaginative Postlude**

Important accomplishments such as writing your life do not just end! T.S. Eliot wrote, "In every end, there is a beginning." As time passes, you may find it useful, or fun, or interesting, to reflect on or consider one or more of the following:

- Take a quiet couple of hours for yourself and look through your family photo albums, boxes of photos, or digital files which you have collected through the years. If your Odyssey were to be published as a book, which photos would best serve as illustrations? Do you want to make copies of any pictures and add them to your manuscript?
- If your manuscript were to become a book, what would your book look like? Would it have a photograph on the jacket? Which one? What would it say on the jacket flap? Who, of the people you know, would write endorsements

for the back cover? Who, of people you do not know, would you like to have write endorsements?

- If your Odyssey were to be made into a film, who would star in it? Cast your film and give it a title! Who would you want to direct it?
- Would your song remain the same? Would you have it play over the titles in the movie of your life? Who would sing it, or would you use the original recording? If you imagine using a new, different song, what is it?

After a couple of months or longer, reread your Odyssey. Talk about your retrospective thoughts with a member of your High Hill group, or with a friend or family member. Do the same thing in a year!

### **Planning a Reunion**

It can be fun, supportive, and instructive to have a High Hill group reunion. Perhaps your group will have made plans for a reunion at their last session. If not, you may want to initiate a one after a year has passed. Contact the group, and set a date, time, and place to gather. People may just want to sit, talk, and catch up. Or they may want a more structured experience. Here are some questions to guide your planning:

- Will the reunion be in a house or a public place? If the reunion is not in a public place, will you consider having a caterer who cleans up? A pot-luck



where everyone contributes and pitches in?

- Will you invite friends and/or families to the reunion? Consider invitation parameters you can apply to everyone in the group, such as one guest per person, or families only.
- Will you invite your facilitator(s) to the reunion? Will you ask them to facilitate part of the time?
- What kind of agenda will you have, if any? A one- or two-item agenda can add depth to the time you spend together. For example, you might ask each person to tell about any progress made on their list of things not to be left undone or ask each person if and how they have revised or shared their Odyssey.
- Will you have a formal opening or closing? Who will plan and lead it?

Be sure and save time to just hang out and talk. A fire in the fireplace, music playing, delicious food and drink, and meeting those amazing people whom you knew hardly at all when you first began, but now know well.

## **Sharing Your Odyssey Further**

You may wish to present your Odyssey to another group, such as your family or friends. Presenting to your High Hill group was great preparation for telling your story to people who have known you for years. Think about the

questions you were asked in your High Hill group, and consider whether you wish to make any corrections or additions to your manuscript because of them. Here are some considerations for planning an outside presentation:

- Who will come? How you will invite them: an email, a written invitation, or a phone call?
- Will you serve refreshments, and what kind? Consider having a friend or a caterer prepare snacks, or having a dessert potluck that is managed by someone else. (You might ask a High Hill member to do this for your family and friends event—and do it for them in return!) You'll have plenty of preparation to take care of. Letting another person help will ease some of the stress.
- If you plan to gather in your home, is enough space for everyone to be seated comfortably? If you do not have the space, consider asking a friend or family member to be your host. Your congregation may have a pleasant and spacious room you can use. If you live in a condominium with a meeting room or a neighborhood that has a community center, consider those possibilities. Imagine your gathering as you would most like it to be: the space, the ambiance, the lighting, the flowers, the temperature, and so on, and then go find the right place to have it.

- If you plan to display photographs or other memorabilia, have the logistics of that well in mind—do not wait until the last minute. Plan to arrive early to set up your display. If you are renting or borrowing a space, make sure it will have the furnishings or equipment you need, such as an extra table, an easel, a bulletin board, or a computer and digital projector. If you want to have displays on the walls or windows, make sure you can do that. If you are going to present in someone else's home, talk over your display needs with them.
- Many people who do Odysseys develop a "book" of their manuscript to give to family members and a few close friends. If you wish to do this, think about the binding, use of illustrations, special inscriptions to each person, and if you want to wrap each book in a special paper. Decide when you give these books. How will you present them? What will you say?
- You may wish to have an audio or video recording made of your presentation. If so, plan for that and recruit someone to do the recording.

woods. You might meet at the local coffee house for a cappuccino. Choose the right place, and the right time, and go for it!

Congratulations, one last time!

## **Closure for Yourself**

Celebrate when you accomplish actions from your list of things you do not wish to leave undone. You may wish to invite others to celebrate with you. You might have dinner out. You might go for a walk on the beach or in the

## CHAPTER 4 - SECOND TWO-DAY RETREAT: A GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time, you are fierce with reality. — Florida Scott-Maxwell, 20th-century writer, feminist, and Jungian analyst

Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing there is a field./ I'll meet you there. — Jelal ad-Din Rumi, 13th-century Persian poet

### PREPARATION

The primary activity for this retreat is each person's presentation of their Odyssey. Following the presentations, participants will reflect on their Odyssey writing experience and begin to consider their list of "things I don't want to leave undone."

Read the plans for the entire weekend retreat. Where there are options, select the best one for your High Hill group. Here are some additional ideas for creating a celebratory atmosphere:

- The first High Hill group invited participants to bring photographs of themselves at different ages. These were posted on a workshop Wall of Fame, with no names to identify them. Participants had great fun seeing the many faces and trying to identify the owners of those younger faces. Some proved to be a mystery, and the group

took much time guessing. There was laughter all around at long straight hair, Afros, tie-dyes and bellbottoms, and the little black dresses and narrow neckties!

- If each participant has been asked to bring a recording of a song that represents them, you might play the songs throughout the retreat. The songs may also be played before, during, or at the end of each person's Odyssey. You might have a time when each participant presents their song, or incorporate songs into worship services during the retreat.
- Include worship at the beginning of the retreat and at its close. Consider using simple readings for all times of parting and gathering during the retreat. Pay special attention to planning a closing worship for the weekend. Gather any readings, aesthetic objects, and music you will need.

Plan the Odyssey presentation schedule. Each participant will need 45 minutes to present, and a half hour for questions. Additionally, plan 15-minute intervals between presentations, so there is ample time to clear the space and set it up for the next presentation. Schedule the mealtimes, worship services, breaks, and post-Odyssey activities, then prepare an agenda to post.

## FLOW OF THE SECOND TWO-DAY RETREAT

### Odyssey Presentations

*Objective:* Participants present their Odysseys.

*Preparation:* Arrange the Odyssey space so there is comfortable seating for all. Provide both a lectern or music stand and a table, so presenters can choose to stand or sit when presenting. Make sure the sound system is in order and that someone knows how to adjust microphone height and volume to accommodate different presenters. Post the agenda.

*Description:* Gather the group and say:  
Each of you is going to present your life story to a room of trusted companions on this journey. They, in turn, will entrust you with their stories. Your responsibility when you are a listener is to pay attention. If you practice profound listening, the Odysseys will thrill and amuse and move you. By listening carefully and deeply, you have the opportunity to enhance this Odyssey experience for the one who is presenting, as well deepen your understanding of your own life. As the Odysseys unfold, who knows what miracles may occur!

### Activity 1: Afterward (30 minutes)

*Objective:* Participants evaluate the experience of preparing and presenting an Odyssey.

*Preparation:* Arrange for celebratory refreshments for after all Odysseys are

presented. Write these sentences on newsprint and post:

- I learned that...
- I was surprised that...
- I was moved when...
- I wish I had...

*Description:* Share celebratory refreshments.

Say:

Congratulations! You have presented your life story to a room full of people who support you and care about you. You have listened deeply to their questions and answered them thoughtfully and truthfully, with love and compassion. You may have put together a written reflection on your life. What a remarkable achievement! How many people do you know, other than those in our group, who have done this? Let's soak in the experience for a moment. Breathe, and let's be silent for a time.

Invite participants to complete the posted sentences in their journals or on a piece of paper, sharing their observations and comments with one another as they are moved to do so. Then, suggest they complete the same four sentences a day or two after getting home, once they have had more time to reflect, and compare the two sets of responses.

### Activity 2: What I Do Not Wish to Leave Undone (20 minutes)

*Objective:* Participants begin to create lists of what they don't want to leave undone.

*Preparation:* Arrange for celebratory refreshments after all Odysseys are presented. Write these sentences on newsprint and post:

- I learned that...
- I was surprised that...
- I was moved when...
- I wish I had...

*Description: Say:*

In the process of preparing, writing, and presenting your Odyssey, you may have begun to think about those things you do not wish to leave undone.

Invite participants to title a new page in their journals "What I Do Not Wish to Leave Undone." Ask them to begin their list, if they are ready, or to begin thinking about what might go on the list. Point out that the participant guide offers suggestions for creating a list and making action plans to follow up.

## **Closing Worship**

*Objective:* Provide closure for the retreat and the program, and invite further reflection and exploration.

*Description:* Close the retreat with the worship service facilitators have planned.

## **CHAPTER 5 - CONGREGATIONAL SERVICE OF RECOGNITION**

A congregational ceremony is a wonderful thing! When a congregation honors its elders by public and celebratory recognition of the years of life and service that have been given they give to themselves as well. Begin by consulting with your minister or worship committee about this. You may choose to form a planning group for the worship service—not the participants!—even before the High Hill workshops begin, and get this special service on the calendar for the congregational year.

Announce from the pulpit and in the congregational newsletter the date the service will take place. Be sure to say that this is a time of honoring the lives and accomplishments of the honorees. List who they are! Encourage participants to invite families and close friends, whether or not they are congregational members. Here is sample text for an invitation:

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of East Cupcake invites you to attend a special Sunday morning service on [date, time, place] as we honor [NAME OF HONOREE]. We will celebrate the lives and accomplishments of congregational members who have participated in the From the High Hill experience. Join us on this joyful day!

Appoint a sub-group to plan a coffee-hour reception with candles, tablecloths, silver services, and delicious refreshments. Pay

special attention to the flowers that morning. You may wish to present each honoree with a corsage or a boutonniere. Be sure the Order of Service lists the names of the honorees. Add a quotation to the Order of Service cover which is appropriate to the morning and fits your group. You may wish to ask ushers to escort the honorees to reserved front row seats.

Resource 4 provides a sample Order of Service for such a celebration.

## CHAPTER 6 - GLIMPSES OF STORIES FROM THE FIRST HIGH HILL GROUP

Every story is a wonderful story.

Here are a lush variety of words from the members of the first High Hill group, people who came together at random, who learned and laughed and sometimes wept together, and who witnessed the telling of one another's life stories.

The entries in italics fill in gaps between quotations. These excerpts, of course, represent only small portions of the full, beautiful stories.

### SHADDON

My grandparents, my mother and I lived on 45 acres at the edge of town. Dexter, Maine was a small town with a population of about 5000. Our home sat at the top of a high hill and on a clear day you could see the White Mountains. There were no children to play with, but I did have Scrappy, a brindle boxer. He was my best buddy. I was told that if I could not be found, they would call the dog and there I would be. Scrappy was obviously better trained than I was. I wasn't bad, but I was mischievous. I locked my grandmother in a room when I was three. She had to climb out onto the roof and called to people driving by to be rescued. At five, I climbed out and up onto the top of that same roof. The challenge was getting me down...

*... We moved to Falls Church, Virginia... memories of Virginia — a red raincoat with a cape, the ceiling in a theater that had moving stars, being lost in the woods and found by the neighbor's dog, chain gangs, the mean billy goat, praying mantises and walking sticks and hitting a boy over the head with a milk bottle because he was throwing rocks at my cat.*

... My grandmother was amazing. She worked full time in the businesses and managed a home without help. She even ironed underwear. On Saturdays she baked. I awoke Saturday mornings to the smell of doughnuts, molasses doughnuts, cinnamon sugar doughnuts, chocolate doughnuts and plain doughnuts. She did her baking for the week which included bread, Parker House rolls, cinnamon rolls, cookies, a cake, and a pie. We would sit at the kitchen table, have doughnuts and milk and talk. She was always interested in what I was doing and what I was thinking.

*The memories just keep bubbling to the surface. My grandfather taught me to drive when I was ten. Ten seems young, but I looked like I was 14. I learned on a big double wheeler truck and my first lessons were around the circular drive. On the first trip out to the road I drove into a ditch when I turned a corner. My grandfather calmly said, "Give her some gas and turn the wheel to the left."*

She (my Aunt Roberta) and my Uncle Shelly had a very good marriage. There was never any doubt about their attraction and affection for each other. He was a nuclear engineer and was responsible for quality control on the first

atomic sub and on others that followed. On one of his inspection trips he had a major heart attack and died. My Aunt was devastated, but in time she did tell me that now she was going to live her life as she wanted. And she did. She even decided that she did not want to be 80, and she died the month before her 80th birthday.

*During recess on the first day of kindergarten, I became a truant. I walked off the school grounds and headed home. I wasn't sure how to get there, but I was heading in the right direction. Uncle Harold saw me walking along as though I knew exactly where I was going.*

The recess game in grade school was the boys chasing the girls around the building. It was in the fourth or fifth grade when I stuck my foot out and tripped Punky Gallant sending him flying. That gave me the reputation of being the toughest girl in my class. With that reputation came the responsibility of defending people or I thought that was my responsibility.

*I was more comfortable with my grandparents than I was with my mother and stepfather. My grandparents and I had a similar sense of humor, similar interests (horses) and we truly enjoyed being together. I have never felt as close to anyone as I did to my grandfather nor have I ever felt as loved by anyone.*

My grandfather bought me a sea dingy and he and I would go out night fishing to catch catfish that were wonderful in fish stew. We also made a couple of trips each summer to Rockland for a lobster bake on the beach. The

Fourth of July was a big event because I always rode my horse in the parade and there was the picnic and the music at the band shelter.

*My closest friend was Barbi Dyer and I spent many days at her cottage where I kept my boat. We swam, caught frogs and mesmerized them by rubbing their bellies. We hunted for crawfish and blood suckers. Bloods suckers offered experiments. We would remove a scab, we always had scabs, and put a blood sucker on the bloody spot. They would of course attach and then we would put salt on them to force them to let go. It was too painful just to pull them off. We also collected garter snakes. Three of us had collected quite a few and we decided to have a little fun with them. My grandmother was having a bridge party so we put the snakes in our hair and walked into the room. As we talked to the ladies the snakes began popping out of our hair. What a wonderful reaction that was!*

Much of my time was still spent at Barbi Dyer's cottage, but now the interest in boys entered the picture... there was a boys' summer school across the lake from Barbi's cottage. That provided all sorts of fun and games. We would tip a canoe over in front of the school and the boys would rush out in boats to rescue us. The most exciting game was to take our bathing suits off under water and wave them around over our heads while treading water. We knew we were being watched through binoculars. Within three minutes a flotilla of boats and boys would be frantically paddling across the



lake. Our challenge was to get the wet bathing suits back on before the boys reached us.

SONG: "Don't Fence Me In"

## CHUCK

I was born in Lexington, Kentucky, "the heart of the bluegrass" on July 28, 1936... it was, and still is, a beautiful rural setting of rolling hills geologically named the "knobs region". We were just west of the mountains of Appalachia.

*I am an only child. My father was 39 and my mother 38 years old when I was born. During my first weeks, both my mother and I contracted pneumonia. As a result, she spent time in the hospital and I was brought home to be cared for by an African American woman hired by my parents. Also, I developed severe eczema and later asthma. I was tied in the crib in order to avoid scratching the eczema.*

I believe my earliest memories are in the range of two or three years old. I can remember riding my tricycle on the sidewalk in front of our house, the one in which my grandmother died. I still remember her being carried out of the house after her death. I can remember being held and rocked by her in the year before she died. My maternal grandfather, William Estill, was a landowner and "gentleman farmer" in the rich soil of the "bottoms" of the Licking River in rural Fleming County. My grandfather lost the farm as a result of trading in wheat futures by two of his sons. Thanks to two of my uncles my inheritance vanished. Behind our house in those early years lived a very proper

gentleman who owned a "show horse"—a beautiful animal which I was allowed to sit from time to time. He had a large mustache, and not knowing about tact, I called it a brush. He shaved it the next day.

*I grew up with a large extended family. As was the custom in rural communities, people had large families so that they would have build in farm labor at no extra cost. I had many uncles, aunts, cousins. My country cousins were often my playmates, and I fondly remember the excitement of driving to their farm and playing in the tree house... my two closest cousins, Sid who was my age, and Jim, a year older, welcomed my visits since during the time I was there they didn't have to work in the fields.*

Saturday nights were interesting in Flemingsburg. That was the real "community time." My father owned a black (they were all black then) 1936 Chevrolet sedan with chrome headlights and solid chrome bumpers. After dinner on Saturday night we would drive to the hill overlooking downtown and park where we could see into the center of town. We would sit in the car—in warm weather I would sit on the fender, and my parents would chat with people as they passed by. Occasionally my father would walk down the hill and mingle with the others, but usually, we just sat. My father would smoke his pipe. This was the time when the farmers and their families would come to town to shop and talk about the weather and their crops.

Our biggest job was in the tobacco fields. I helped with the planting, hoeing out the

weeds, pulling off tobacco worms (some sort of caterpillar), topping the plants so they would grow wider leaves, and prepare the baskets for market... the worst job on the farm for me was filling the silo. My job was to stand inside the silo and direct the ground up silage around so it would pack evenly. The problem was that I have/had really bad allergies, particularly to ragweed which was mixed in with the silage. Lots of sneezing.

*My cousin, Tommy, got me a summer job for my college years working for the local Rural Electric Association. I headed a crew that was mapping the entire eight county districts—locating each house and transformer that was on the grid. A very interesting job, since I had to learn how to meet and talk with the very rural and mountain people of the area. Once, in the spring, we came upon a farmhouse in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. A man came towards us waving his arms and yelling. We were the first people he had seen since the previous fall. I once got stuck in a swampy area in the middle of a forest. And, even though I was driving a four-wheel drive vehicle, I couldn't get out. Fortunately a farmer with a team of mules was near enough to pull us out.*

Marsha, my wife, says that my early life in Flemingsberg was idyllic.

SONG: "My Old Kentucky Home"

## **BETSY**

This May I stepped onto the Camino de Santiago in Spain to complete a solitary pilgrimage of discovery. I was given an

opportunity to review my life and received the gift of insight into lifelong patterns that were set into motion long ago. I chose to walk the Camino to help my transition from retirement to the next productive phase of my life. Why the Camino de Compostela in Spain and not some other trek or adventure? Well I wanted to learn from the spiritual people who traveled before me. The Camino has been traveled by millions of people since 800 AD. As I walked over the well-worn paths, I could feel their strength, their trials and their wisdom. I discovered that if you know what your passion in life is, that others will gather to help you reach that goal. I experienced that kind of support on the Camino from strangers from over twenty countries, locals, and from the spirits of others that walked before me. A fellow pilgrim wrote, "I am going on the Camino once again, looking for something I left behind or perhaps never found. It's like coming home."

Day 1 on the Camino.

*I stepped out into the rain and onto the path that so many before me had traveled. I wasn't sure where I would sleep or eat... I was starting "anew" by reflecting on the past and making some decisions about the future. I didn't want old patterns or fears to hold me back or let me make unconscious decisions for the future any more...*

*This was the first pattern I identified: Try to make others happy whenever one can...*

*Pattern 2: Try your very best not to be any trouble or ask for what you need. This is the only way to help when you are little and the family is having problems...*

*Pattern 3: When you are in trouble, let other people fight your battles...*

I started private kindergarten at age five and met my lifelong friend, Pam. We have now been friends for 50 years...

*Pattern 4: Leave home/run away if things get tough at home.*

Pam and I did everything together! We were in the same classrooms in Kindergarten, first, second, and third grades. It was such a comforting stability in my life. We joined Campfire Girls, played jacks, had birthday parties and did everything that little girls do... we discovered the Beatles together and played records and sang for hours. I still dream about Pam's house. The funny thing is Pam has such fond memories of my house and says that she still has dreams about it.

Pam and I went to camp near Las Vegas, New Mexico and we both fell in love with New Mexico. I visited NM with my family, too. We had an old log cabin in Rudiso, NM. I slept in the quilt box and we had only oil lanterns for lighting. I loved the simplicity and running in the woods and playing in the river. My family rented a horse one summer and I rode this giant horse with my dad and I do believe it was one of the happiest moments of my childhood...

*Pattern 5: I developed a life-long love for animals and for New Mexico.*

I have memories at this age of "looking for God."... I recently asked my mom about this and she said, "You were interested in spiritual things from a very early age. You always asked... Where does God live?"

*Pattern 6: There is a god, but you have to go and find him!*

SONG: "Turn, Turn, Turn"

## **TERRY**

As I contemplate the 51 years that have elapsed since my arrival on that presumably cool 24th day of November in 1946, I'm reminded that we all have our story and perhaps the telling of this story will remind me of who I am.

*A glance at my ancestry, at least as much of it as I'm aware of will reinforce the facts of my modest beginnings... I descend, apparently on both sides of the aisle, from those who left the British Isles in the late 1600s and early 1700s for the promises of opportunity in the New World.*

I'm sure the emergence of World War II was the impetus for my parent's marriage, and as you can see from the date of my birth, my conception followed closely on the heels of the conclusion of my father's military service. My parents were both in nurse's training and as was expected in the culture of the day, my mother quit school to raise her son. Mom, one of eight children from a salt-of-the-earth

Wisconsin family, was always the anchor in our home.

*By my 16th birthday, we had lived in 16 different houses in six states. At times I've been asked if I kept in touch with any of my childhood friends, and I've had to say that there are very few names that I can even remember. In spite of all this, I'd have to say that my parents were both loving and supportive during my formative years.*

Dad always raised a big garden, and when we weren't tending to weeding and harvesting vegetables, he and I did get in the occasional fishing trip. Mom was known for her homemade bread—a skill she successfully passed on to my wife. What a wonderful bridge between my past and the present this bread has turned out to be, and I will venture to say that the bread of the present is even an improvement over the bread of my childhood.

*Some of the good things I remember about my childhood were outdoor barefoot summer adventures. I loved the frogs, snakes, turtles and fish that inhabited the woods and waterways surrounding the town in central Wisconsin where we lived for several years, and would escape to them whenever I could. One beautiful spring day I was walking in a clearing in the woods and came upon a mass of probably 200 garter snakes—talk about boy paradise! I picked them up by the handfuls and had a great time. Of course this ten year old boy didn't realize that he'd broken up a mating scene...*

One of the highlights of our summers is when our grandchildren come to visit. Our grandson, currently fifteen, has been diagnosed with a complex of musculo-skeletal problems that may very well shorten his life... while he was here this summer, we ended up in the lounge chairs outside, after dark, looking up into the starry heavens with binoculars. On his own, he started asking me questions about life—what I think is important, what I think about the end of life, what I think about relationships, what I think about God. Once more, as I write this, remembering those precious moments brings tears to my eyes. He must have related his experience to his sister, because when she came down a couple of weeks later, she also wanted to look at the stars with grandpa. It just doesn't get any better than that.

SONG: "The Winter's End" (from Celtic Christmas)

## **MARSHA**

I was born into a beautiful old house, four stories if you counted the full basement and attic, which I did. There were beveled glass French doors at the entrance to the living area, a playroom/music room, a dining room, huge kitchen, three large bedrooms upstairs, a walk-through coat closet, and alas, only one bathroom which the four of us somehow shared. I was very intrigued by the dusty musty attic and its possibilities, but not allowed to go there. I also found our strangely shaped closets interesting. I'd sneak into my sister's to see what clothes awaited me in four years,

though my mother's dress them alike phase lasted a number of years so I already knew some of the outfits. Only rarely did I sneak into my parents' long closet with a dormer window at the end. One year I completely ruined my Christmas surprises by trying on the clothes I found in bags there. The laundry chute was a real temptation; I so wanted to slide down three floors to the basement. But I could barely see the 90-degree bend and realized I could get painfully stuck. I loved the milk box, the shelves of preserved fruit in our damp basement, the sound of coal being delivered and banging its way down the chute. I sat on hot floor registers and felt the sting as my snowsuit dried out. The gardens were full of wonderful plants: hollyhocks (we made dolls from the blossoms), several varieties of daisies, roses and even gourds one year. There was an apple tree out back that I climbed as if through making the ascension I arrived in a new dimension, a place for dramatizations. We named the process "story." We or sometimes just I would become characters surviving a struggle suggested by a fairy tale, a TV show, or our imaginations. Some stories were repeated and refined, some were short lived.

*At around age five I fell backwards out of the tree while eating cinnamon red hearts from a paper cupcake holder. I still remember having the wind knocked out of me and gasping for air and having my dislocated shoulder put back into place. I spent many ecstatic hours gathering weeds, seeds, stones, feathers, moss and such and creating muddy*

*sculptures. There was a cherry tree with tiny bright red poison berries which I wasn't to touch.*

In looking back at my life I find I must recall relatives from whom I undoubtedly inherited genetic traits and unconsciously imitated behaviors, accepted or rejected attitudes and learned stories about triumphs and tragedies... I don't know much about my mother's childhood. I sense that she was shy. She had a pet rabbit and fell into a cow pen... She always had a dignified and virtuous bearing, huge sensitive brown eyes and black hair... she worried about her actions, always wanting to do the right thing. Like my father, she strove to fix things, make life fair. I heard "I didn't sleep a wink last night worrying about such and such" from her often. She was very duty-oriented and worrying seemed to be part of her duty. Cleanliness was important and we traveled with a jar of soapy water in our glove compartment. I was not allowed to eat the bottom of ice cream cones which might have been set on a counter. A few years ago after watching a documentary about polio, I decided that she really wasn't obsessive-compulsive, just trying to keep us safe.

*Cancer had attacked her spine and (their) morphine helped amazingly. My mother used the same determination she had drawn on to recover and focused on dying. I will always remember bathing her, holding her hand... the most important tasks I have ever done, will ever do. In deference to her desires I held my grief in her presence. When I once did cry,*

*almost silently, she said, "Don't do that" and I replied "I can't be brave all the time, can I?" She answered, "I guess not." During what was to be her last night (though we thought she had several weeks left) I willed myself to wake up every 45 minutes or so, to offer her water, comfort. After several times in there she said, "Marsha go back to sleep. You don't need to come in so often. There are others, I can hear them, they are helping."*

Once my father brought me a red metal fire truck, which I especially loved because it seemed to be a boy toy and such a surprise. He spent time guiding my bike by the seat until I could make it around the corner, many bandaged knees later. He pitched balls into my gloved hand. He put me up on his shoulders at parades. He said often enough for me to remember now, "My girl can do anything"... which both empowered and intimidated me.

*There was a bitter, caustic side to my father and I felt the power of it only rarely. As he got older he went into depression at times and was medicated... he grieved deeply, continually after my mother, his wife of 56 years, died. His congestive heart failure worsened to the point that he needed more help than I could give. At the assisted living facility he would sequester himself in the bathroom to make the animal howls and sobs he thought no one could hear. His spirit and body weakened and he slipped into renal failure. Before this he once said, "Promise you'll remember me as I used to be." I went to see him every morning and every night as I*

*continued teaching. I wheeled him out in the courtyard to see the birds. He no longer tried to talk or listen but still let me hold his hand. He withdrew into himself. One night the hospice nurse and I sat with him certain it was the end. I heard him argue with Death... "I know this has to happen, just not yet." He came out of his coma-like state, asked me for cranberry juice and lived another two months. At the moment of death, he opened his eyes and looked up, reaching towards the ceiling, then exhaled a final breath.*

SONG: "Both Sides Now"

## **BRENDA**

On a cold sunny day the year 1944, a child was pulled into the world by an intoxicated Dr. Sweet in the town of Ritzville in the state of Washington... the first ten years were spent living on a farm seven-and-one-half miles from town. The house was old, but mom made it comfortable and it was tastefully decorated for its time. I remember the old wood cookstove, the trash burner, the table and chairs, the sink and the cupboards in the kitchen and the high window where the cat would jump up in the evening and eat the millers, the telephone on the wall with the crank to place a call to the operator, the pantry attached by a door which held the milk separator and later the pasteurizer and assorted kitchen necessities, and the spooky door to the cellar with no real stairs. The only outside door was never locked—I don't remember a key.

*Oh, the Christmas tree and the presents Santa Claus left! It was tradition to go to Christmas Eve church services in town, so for years I didn't realize it was my mom who put presents under the tree... she was always the last person out the door. Christmas time also meant baking of cookies and Aunt Hulda's candy... the fudge, penuche and my favorite divinity.*

Spring was going out to locate the wildflowers that bloomed—buttercups, blue bells, birdie bills and lady slippers—only to be found in secret locations. Summer—swimming in the mud hole with friends and having a mud fight and the horror of my mother trying to clean us up—we ended in the cattle trough. Harvest time with the harvest crew and the long days and the good food. My Aunt Hulda coming out to help us can fruits and vegetables for the long winter, my job was to put the fruit in the jar, my small hands could arrange the fruit just perfect.

*When I was four, electricity came to the farm. My Dad bought my Mom an electric stove, refrigerator, and twin front-loading washer and dryer... it was so cool!*

The farm animals... baby chicks that became fryers to sell and the hens who lay the eggs and the roosters who chased you, and you had to run like the wind to escape their flying feet... the talons could rip you to shreds. The time we played in the hay barn, and crashing on the hard baled hay and knocking the breath out of myself and cracking my collarbone. It wasn't until years later that I wondered where the

calcification came from. The pig pen and the milk cow and the steers... watching animals being shot and butchered for food. The meat was stored in a locker in town. It was very cold and kind of spooky... reminded me of a movie called *The Thing*. The time I watched Pop in the shop welding my trike and getting a spanking with a willow branch. I had had strict instructions not to watch as the torch without goggles was dangerous to the eyes...

*I love the freedom to have friends in all walks of life, life styles, life beliefs... it is a journey that has brought freedom, peace and joy! Who knows what adventures lie ahead! Life is a journey and for me, one's path is often ... like the song, "The Rose"!!!!*

SONG: "The Rose"

## **STEVE**

(My mom and dad) met at Edison High School in Minneapolis. I think their lockers were near one another. After high school, Dad joined Roosevelt's CCC, cut timber and built roads in northern Minnesota, and joined the Marine Corps in 1939. He wrote... from his new duty station, so happy to be in Pearl Harbor, Oahu. The morning of 7 December, Dad was walking down the steps of the chapel in the navy when the Zeros flew over on their first bombing run. He spent the rest of the day atop the Marine barracks, manning an antiaircraft piece. On 16 July while the secret A-bomb was detonated at Trinity Site, New Mexico, (my parents) were married at Saint Charles Borrowmeo Church in Minneapolis. Halfway through Officers

Candidate School in North Carolina, the Japanese surrendered. Dad was transferred to Crane Naval Weapons Depot in Indiana, where he and mom lived in a cabin and were the only human inhabitants on a pristine lake. I have a photo of them, looking radiant... I was born a couple of years later. Dad mustered out of the Marines... a couple of years later, Dad enlisted in the Army and was schooled in intelligence.

*When I was four, we took a train to New York City and boarded a ship that steamed past a whale lazying on the surface, made port in French Morocco, threaded the Strait of Gibraltar, and paused for a day or two in Italy and Greece, before we reached our new home in Istanbul. Dad worked at the Consulate.*

*The folks enrolled me in kindergarten at Notre Dame de Sion, run by French nuns. I began hearing French and German from my fellow students and Turkish on the street. The next year, I was in first grade at the American Community School. We lived across the street from Rumeli Hissar, a fifteenth century castle. It had a real dungeon I peered at through the iron bars. I played in the courtyard and on the ramparts overlooking the Bosphorus, and ships from everywhere.*

*Dad's boss, some mysterious colonel I never saw, gave him his choice of overseas assignment. Dad liked the Dominican Republic, and brought home Spanish language LPs from the State Department library... Dad opted for Costa Rica instead... I loved the long black beach at Puntarenas.*

*Dad retired... (then) joined the American Red Cross as a liaison to the military and after a training period, got assigned to West Berlin. We flew to Frankfurt, and took the duty train through the Soviet Zone. Pulling into the outskirts of Berlin at dawn was eerie. Outside the window were armed East German and Russian soldiers looking back. In their sentry posts in the grey dawn, our cold war enemy looked not fierce, but like boys who wanted to come in from the cold.*

One evening I went to a movie with a friend. We saw *Lost Command* with Anthony Quinn. The opening scene is the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu fighting off an overwhelming force of Viet Minh. Crouching in bunkers and trenches, low on ammo, they overcome personal differences and band as a fighting unit until they're overrun...

I walked out of the theatre with my pal, and declared, sure as I'd ever been of anything, "I'm going to enlist in the army." A few months later I was in basic training at Fort Ord, south of San Francisco. A Green Beret sergeant came by our company and asked if anyone wanted to apply for Special Forces. Yep...

*I was real clear I wanted to go to 'Nam and take on a numerically superior force of Communist soldiers, and kick ass... we learned tactics and strategy, radio communications, use of light and heavy weapons, operation and intelligence, engineering and demolitions and medical procedures to diagnose and treat everything from septic gunshot wounds to rat-bite fever*



*and bubonic plague. I'd get a chance to use it all, and also see, up close, leprosy, suppurating amputations, yaws, clap and maybe a thousand dead bodies. I contracted malaria, stepped on a punji stake, burned leeches off my legs after crossing streams and get medevaced out of the bush. Two days later, my unit was machine-gunned as the Chinook helicopter came in to pick them up. The half who weren't killed outright were wounded, some horribly. Sometimes I think it over, then find myself hyperventilating, sitting on the floor, shaking.*

One of my favorite lines in film is from a movie called *Wolf*. Jack Nicholson's character is listening to Michelle Pfeifer's character complain about her hard luck. Nicholson wryly replies, "In an odd way, you're your own problem." For me, this really sums up the universal condition... it certainly spoke to mine. It's impossible to have a real relationship with anyone else if you really don't know and love yourself.

*"Why don't you go to Viet Nam? You're always talking about it." And I did. I taught for two months in Vinh, a few kilometers from Ho Chi Minh's birthplace. In general, people could not have been kinder, and I got a lot of material for the novel I'm writing on the American war... mostly, though, my heart and mind got a lot of healing. I'm learning a lot, mostly about me.*

SONG: "It's a Wonderful World"

## LINDA

I like the quote from Mary Oliver's poem, "The Summer Day:"

Tell me, what is it you plan to do / With your one wild and precious life?

I'm not afraid to ask that question and not vague about my answer. If I have a personal goal, it is to be as free as possible so my inside life and my outside life are the same. If I have a creative goal, it is to write one good poem.

Family life was always secure. Here is what you could have heard at our 5:30 suppers together—the dynamics between Ma, Dad, my younger sister Ginny and me: Ted, would you look at that? Mrs. Wilcox? She's got fat as a pig! Ma, can I have corn privilege? I'll eat a real balanced meal tomorrow. Just this once... Ginny is a chubbette size. Is the gravy good? It's real good Ma. Your grandmother's has three inches of grease. You know, Dad, when I was at Granny's the last few times I didn't see Fluffy. There is a stone in your Grandmother's garden that says Fluffy on it. God, Ted. Did you have to say it that way? Ma, the principal is going to call... I smoked in the Girls Room. Your poor mother! How could you do this to your father and me? I think I won the Hartwell Biology award. It's going to be in tomorrow's Sentinel. I was saving it for a surprise. Ma, may I please be excused?

*I remember planting maple tree seedlings in the lawn and Dad respectfully mowing around each little stone ring. Years later, when the neighborhood trees all died from Dutch elm*

*disease, those maple trees provided shade on hot summer days. They still do.*

Sometimes when Dad came home from work Ma would tell him I had been bad and needed a strapping. He would dutifully go get the black belt from the back of the bathroom closet door and while my mother supervised *one stroke only and only on the thighs*, I'd cry as neighborhood loud as I could muster while getting my whack. No punishment ever affected my behavior. My crime was usually hitting my sister harder than she hit me. I never physically started it, but did it psychologically until she responded in frustration.

To make Dad feel badly I cut the buckle off the belt. I knew I would never have been hit with that end. No one ever said anything.

Dad only wrote me one letter. During my heavy husband-hunting freshman year my grades were terrible and the dean contacted him. He wrote me: *Dean Wilcox says you are flunking out of school. If you do it will kill your mother.*

Dad worked in a factory. When he retired he helped convert his job to a computer. He could fix anything well. One year after he retired he was dead. I wrote this poem then:

### **Helix**

As my father

Lay dead

Folded hands

Skill-less

Unembarrassed

From all the attention

Half my genes

Spun wild

Like a red stripe

On a new tin top

Whirling across

Brown roses

On the worn

Linoleum floor

To cries of

Daddy! Daddy!

... Oh, Daddy.

My mother was the most significant person in my life... We'd read T.S. Eliot. She liked me to tickle her arm—I guess because she longed for touch. She would say *your dad is a good father to you but not a good husband*. I didn't want to hear that so I'd say *why don't you leave*. She would say *I should know better than to talk to you*. She lived alone until she was eighty-three and broke her hip falling from a kitchen chair swatting a ceiling spider. In the recovery facility she enjoyed that period when old age and infirmities make social distinctions irrelevant. She discovered the role of bright old lady, replaced negating and self-sorrow with

living and became much easier to get along  
with.

Ambivalence

Time to make the Sunday call

Is now no time at all.

My mother's missing voice

Cuts in as phantom pain.

Like light through

Frames of film

Flashes of her wistful looks

Proud or disapproving,

The gestures won't be still.

I was the first one to arrive back at my  
mother's home after she died.

SONG: "The Beginning"

## **CHAPTER 7 - RESOURCES**

Resource 1: Sample Registration Form for Your High Hill Workshop

Resource 2: Sample Participant Letter for Your Packet

Resource 3: Sample Letter for Groups Meeting Locally, Sleeping at Home

Resource 4: Sample Order of Service for Celebration of Elders

Resource 5: "The Layers," by Stanley Kunitz

Resource 6: Things to Not Leave Undone

Resource 7: Presenting a High Hill Workshop in a Non-retreat Setting

Resource 8: Experiencing the Program Solo or in a Pair

Resource 9: Evaluations

## RESOURCE 1 SAMPLE REGISTRATION FORM FOR YOUR HIGH HILL WORKSHOP

[Insert the name, address, email address, and phone number of the sponsoring organization or individual, e.g., your congregation's letterhead.]

Be yourself. Everyone else is taken. — PEANUTS, a comic strip

YES! I want to come! Please register me for the From the High Hill program. Enclosed you will find my information and a check for \$ [insert amount].

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE \_\_\_\_\_ EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

NAME OF CONGREGATION \_\_\_\_\_

I HAVE THE FOLLOWING FOOD ALLERGIES/PREFERENCES. Please list:

I PREFER A (CHECK ONE):  SINGLE [insert price] or  DOUBLE [insert price]

I HAVE THE FOLLOWING SPECIAL NEEDS (MOBILITY IMPAIRMENT, HEARING LOSS, ETC.).  
Please list:

Please make your check for [amount of money due] payable to: [name of payee] and mail it to [address].

Thank you! We look forward to meeting you and to your participation. You will receive a packet a week to ten days prior to our start date.

If you have any questions, please call [name, phone number].

## RESOURCE 2 SAMPLE PARTICIPANT LETTER FOR YOUR PACKET

Date

Name

Address

City, state, zip

Dear [use first name],

Congratulations! And welcome to our High Hill group! You will be a participant in two exciting and introspective retreat weekends that will guide you as you research and write your life story and identify those things you do not wish to leave undone before you die. Together, our group will engage in activities that will help you develop and structure your reflection and writing. We will support one another through the writing process and be one's another's first audience for presentation of our Odysseys.

You will be one of [number] participants, plus our facilitator [use name] who will gather at [name of retreat center] on [date of first weekend] and [date of second weekend]. Between these two weekends you will write your Odyssey—your own life's journey—which you will present to the entire group on the second weekend. Enclosed with this letter, you will find:

- Information on how to get to [name of retreat center]
- A brochure from [name of retreat center]
- A list of what to bring for the workshop
- A brief biography of our facilitator
- Our tentative agenda for the first weekend
- Your "prep" work assignment (Note: Bring your prep work with you.)
- Our evaluation form, to complete at the close of the program.

Black Elk spoke about standing "on the high hill of my old age," looking at the long view of his life in the four directions, and telling his story. Similarly, we each have the opportunity and the right to tell our own story, and to pass along this legacy to those who follow. So many of us leave our stories untold! In High Hill, we will begin to change that, in a lovely and hospitable setting with good-hearted, like-minded people. We anticipate and appreciate your participation.

Please take a moment to look over the enclosures and please call if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

[names of group organizer and/or facilitator]

## RESOURCE 3 SAMPLE LETTER FOR GROUPS MEETING LOCALLY, SLEEPING AT HOME

Date

Name

Address

City, State, Zip

Dear [participant's first name],

Welcome to our From the High Hill group workshop, and congratulations! You will participate in an exciting and introspective process that will inform and support you as you rediscover your life and write your Odyssey. You will be encouraged to look at where you have been, where you are, and where you are going, including identifying those things you do not wish to leave undone.

Every life journey is a hero's journey, and we look forward to hearing about yours.

You will be one of [number] participants, plus our facilitator, [facilitator's name]. We will gather at [name and location of the first gathering place] on [date and time]. During this program, we will meet in member's homes; an enclosure with this letter provides places, dates, and times. You will also find directions to our meeting place; what you need to bring with you; a list of required prep work; workshop agendas; and a taste of what to expect. Please take a moment to look over the enclosures. Be sure to call if you have questions or concerns.

Black Elk wrote about standing "on the high hill of my old age," looking at a long view of his life in each of the great directions, and then re-telling his story. We each have the opportunity and the right to tell our own story for those who follow, a passing along of our legacy. Too many of today's elders leave their stories untold. In the High Hill program, we will in some small measure begin to change that, in a lovely, hospitable setting with good-hearted, like-minded people. We anticipate your special participation and look forward to welcoming you!

[Signature of group organizer]

[Signature of facilitator]

Enclosures: [List the enclosures so participants can verify they have received them all!]



## **RESOURCE 4 SAMPLE ORDER OF SERVICE FOR CELEBRATION OF ELDERS**

### **Prelude**

Have musicians play a medley from the songs that will be sung.

### **Welcome and Announcements**

### **Lighting the Chalice**

Have the group say in unison Reading 683 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, "Be Ours a Religion" by Theodore Parker.

### **Singing**

"This Little Light of Mine," Hymn 118 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

### **Meet and Greet**

Invite people to meet those they do not know and to greet those they do.

### **Sharing of Responsibility**

Offering collection

### **Readings**

Each High Hill participant shares a paragraph or two from their Odyssey.

### **Reading**

"The Layers," poem by Stanley Kunitz ([Resource 5](#) (included in this document) ), read in unison by the High Hill group

### **Meditation**

### **Singing**

"For All That is Our Life," Hymn 128 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

## Speaking

Minister's homily

## Celebration

*Minister:* Dear friends, it is our honor and our delight to celebrate the accomplishments of you who live among us. The Bible tells us that "gray hair is a crown of glory" and since you are already wear those crowns, whether in name or in deed, or both, it remains only for us to formally recognize you and to accept you as elders of this congregation. Will you please rise in body or spirit?

*President of Congregation:* Will you (names of High Hill participants) commit yourselves to moving among us gently, counseling us wisely, and informing both youth and adult with the learning of your years and experiences of your lives?

*High Hill participants:* We will.

*President of Congregation:* And will you welcome our gratitude, love and care in recognition of all you have done and all you have been to us? And will you let us lighten your load of duty and responsibility when the time comes?

*High Hill participants:* We will.

*President of Congregation:* Members of this congregation, please rise in body or spirit. Will you give gratitude, love and recognition to all these Elders have done and all they have been to us? And will you offer to lighten their loads of duty and responsibility when the time comes?

*Congregation:* We will.

*President of Congregation:* And will you now welcome them and recognize them as Elders of this congregation?

*Congregation:* We will.

*Minister:* Elders, be glad and speak with me the words, from Black Elk, Reading 614 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

*President of the Congregation:* And will you all now join in "The Larger Circle" by Wendell Berry, Reading 646 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. We will read responsively, with the congregation reading the words in plain type and the elders reading those in italics.

## Singing

"For All the Saints," Hymn 103 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

## Closing

Words by Barbara Pescan, Reading 680 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

## Postlude

## RESOURCE 5 THE LAYERS BY STANLEY KUNITZ

*"The Layers". Copyright (C) 1978 by Stanley Kunitz, from THE COLLECTED POEMS by Stanley Kunitz. Used by permission of W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.*

*Stanley Kunitz was a 20th/21st-century American poet, named American Poet Laureate in 2000.*

I have walked through many lives,

Some of them my own,

And I am not who I was,

Though some principle of being

Abides, from which I struggle

Not to stray.

When I look behind,

As I am compelled to look,

Before I can gather strength

To proceed on my journey,

I see the milestones dwindling

Toward the horizon

And the slow fires trailing

From the abandoned campsites

Over which scavenger angels

Wheel on heavy wings.  
Oh, I have made myself a tribe  
Out of my true affections  
And my tribe is scattered!  
How shall the heart be reconciled  
To its feast of losses?  
In a rising wind  
The manic dust of my friends,  
Those who fell along the way  
Bitterly sting my face.  
Yet I turn, I turn,  
Exulting somewhat,  
With my will intact to go  
Wherever I need to go,  
And every stone on the road  
Precious to me.  
In my darkest night,  
When the moon was covered and I  
Roamed through wreckage,  
A nimbus-clouded voice  
Directed me:  
“Live in the layers,  
not the litter.”  
Though I lack the art to decipher it,

No doubt the next chapter

In my book of transformations

Is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

## **RESOURCE 6 THINGS TO NOT LEAVE UNDONE**

Become closer to my sister.

Learn Spanish.

Plan one last trip to Kentucky.

Write one great poem.

Talk to my Uncle Vern.

Hold an historical gathering with my family, and travel to where each of us was born.

Expand my photography.

I want a great body.

Get back to painting.

Research my father's health.

Make decisions about a relationship.

Sculpture a tightrope walker.

Purge my photo albums.

— a list from the first High Hill group

## **RESOURCE 7 PRESENTING A HIGH HILL WORKSHOP IN A NON-RETREAT SETTING**

Here are some things to consider if your group—whether for convenience or to minimize expenses—chooses to meet locally, and stay in their own homes:

- Do we want to meet in a home, in people's living rooms? Do we have a living space among us that is large enough to accommodate us all, with comfortable seating for everyone? Will

participants have a way to write comfortably? Is there “break-out” space for small group or paired conversations? An option to consider is to move from one home to another; you can even ask your host to take you on a tour of the house and to point out the things in it that are significant to them.

- If we decide not to meet in a retreat center, what are our alternatives to people’s homes? Our congregation’s building? A local meeting space, such as a Senior Center, a library, or a private facility we could rent or borrow, such as a condominium complex’s meeting space? Could we do an exchange with another congregation?
- Where will we have meals? Will we eat out at all? How often? Where? Or will our meals be catered and brought in? Can we make a catering arrangement that includes clean-up? Or, will we share in meal preparation, heating and setting out meals we have prepared in advance? Can we ask another High Hill group, or another group in our congregation, to prepare and serve the meals in exchange for us providing them with meals at another time?

The advantage of meeting from your homes is that it is likely to be a low-cost, convenient alternative. It’s familiar; participants get to sleep in their own beds at night and need not travel far. The disadvantage is that in a retreat center everything is done for you and participants can focus completely on the process and one another. Further, being away from home invites a more intimate dynamic, which does make a difference for group interaction.

If you decide to meet in homes, or locally, and people in your group do not know one another well, take a bit more time for “getting acquainted” activities, as you won’t have the built in possibility for intimacy that a retreat center offers.

[Resource 3](#) (included in this document) is a sample “welcome” letter for groups meeting locally. It offers a slightly different perspective than a letter for participants meeting at a retreat center.

## **RESOURCE 8 EXPERIENCING THE PROGRAM SOLO OR IN A PAIR**

Working alone or with one other person can be an interesting and effective way to engage with the High Hill program. Collaborating with another person, particularly if you live in an area that does not have a Unitarian Universalist congregation, can be a wider and more affirming experience than working alone. However, some people prefer to make this journey by themselves, taking things at their own speed, focusing on what interests them most, rather like a solo camping experience. You know your style and preference best.

If you decide to go it alone, set a work schedule for yourself, including completion dates for each step of the process and time to review your process periodically. When you review your progress,

consider which parts of the project have touched you most deeply. What writing have you done eagerly and joyfully, and what parts of preparing and writing your Odyssey have you shied away from? Sometimes what you preferred not to do reveals more important parts of your life story than what you preferred to do!

Working with another person on this program can be a very moving and intimate experience. Choose a person with whom you are comfortable and whom you respect and trust. Begin by making a calendar with agreements about how often you will meet and what you will focus on at each meeting. Agree to pay attention to one another during your meeting times and stop when you are done or have reached the agreed-on end time. During your initial meeting times, try to do as many activities from the first retreat weekend plan as you can together, and give each other feedback. Once you have begun the writing process, divide your meeting time equally, so that you use half of the time together to focus on each person's work. Or, you may wish to spend one whole meeting on one person's work and the next on the other person's.

Here are additional suggestions for partner work:

- Set aside five minutes at the beginning and the end of your meetings to check in with one another: Use the beginning time to catch up on what has been happening in one another's lives and the end time for closure and agreeing on how the time in your next meeting will be used.
- Decide if you wish to exchange pages prior to your meeting. One of the great gifts of modern technology is the capacity to electronically forward pages to another person. If you are both able to use electronic communication, decide if you want to use it in your work together, or if you prefer silence/no contact between meetings.
- You may wish to vary your meeting place. Or you may prefer to always use the same place. Talk this over and agree ahead of time. It is best to meet when and where there are no, or few, distractions.
- When you are writing, discuss and agree on the kind of feedback you will give and receive. Some writers are really looking for copy editors—specific feedback on grammar, spelling, syntax, style, continuity. Others want input on clarity, content, and flow.
- One way to meet is to go for a walk, or a hike. This assumes you have read the pages that you will be discussing. It is a pleasant, healthy, and often very intimate way to talk.
- Consider how you want to present your completed Odysseys. Will you present them to each other? Gather a group?

## Approaching a Friend to Work with You

If you would like to do this program with a friend, start by giving or loaning your friend a printout of *From the High Hill* or invite them to read it online. Tell your friend why you find it appealing and why you thought of doing it with them, in particular. Invite them to examine the program. Make a date to discuss it and how you might do it together.

## RESOURCE 9 EVALUATIONS

Evaluations help us know how to do it better next time—what worked and what didn't work well, and why. And, they provide feedback about our success as a facilitator. Here are three methods for evaluating your program:

- Create a numerical assessment. Ask participants to rank, by specified numbers, the activities and program pieces of the workshop.
- Create an evaluation form with incomplete sentences. Ask participants to complete the sentences to express their opinions and feelings about the workshop experience.
- Create a form which offers open-ended questions and space for participants to write their answers.

You may use one or a combination of these alternatives.