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**Touchstones Project**

**Small Group Discussion Guide**

**Ritual**

**Preparation:** (Read the *Touchstones Journal* on the theme and the questions below.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** “One purpose of creative ritual was to experience the connection to ‘the other’ as well as a deeper connection to oneself. That’s why ancient people would say: that ritual made me more aware of how I’m connected to life, to the earth, to the spirits, to the song of creation, and made me more aware of who I am inside, at the level of my own being. What we’ve lost is partly the sense that we are each connected to the whole thing, that each human soul is secretly connected to the living soul of the world.” -*Michael Meade*

**Chalice Lighting** (James Vila Blake), adapted.

(In unison) Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human needs, and to help one another.

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering, where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes and to honor your time limit.

**Read the Wisdom Story**: Take turns reading the following wisdom story.

*Wisdom Story: Flowers Have the Gift of Language*

He was born in Bohemia in 1870. She was born there in 1888. Bohemia became part of Czechoslovakia in 1918.

He was raised Roman Catholic. Her religious background is unknown.

She was a librarian, and he was a Baptist minister. Both came to the United States at different times and for different reasons. She moved to New York City with her family in 1907 when she was 19. He came to the United States in 1914, fleeing government reprisals because he was very outspoken. Then World War I consumed Europe from 1914 until 1918.

She was single. He had been married twice, but both of his wives had died. He was the father of nine children. The three youngest came to America with him.

She worked at the Webster Branch of the New York Public Library. He was the minister of the First Slovak Baptist Church in Newark, NJ.

In 1914, she became head of the Czech section of the library. In 1915, he was tried for heresy by a Baptist tribunal, although he was acquitted.

Norbert Fabian Čapek [pronounced chah-peck] met Majà Veronica Oktavec at that library. They married on June 23, 1917, and Majà resigned her job. In 1919, they bought a home in Belleview, NJ. Norbert became the minister of another Baptist church. But, by September of that year, his many years of doubt caused him to resign. He wrote in his diary, “I cannot be a Baptist anymore, even in compromise. The fire of new desires, new worlds, is burning inside me.”

Many people who left Bohemia began returning because Czechoslovakia had become independent. In 1920, the Čapeks decided to go back. They sold their house, but departure delays forced them to rent an apartment in East Orange, NJ. Norbert and Majà encouraged their children to attend Sunday Schools at different churches and decide which one they liked best. Their favorite was the First Unitarian Church in Orange, NJ. Then, Norbert and Majà attended, finding “not only clear heads but warm hearts, too.” They became members on January 10, 1921. Joining seemed like fate because Norbert, who had met Unitarians in Berlin in 1910 at the International Association for Religious Freedom meeting, had been called a Unitarian by professor Tomáš Masaryk, who became the first president of Czechoslovakia. The minister in Orange, NJ, Dr. Walter Reid Hunt, introduced Norbert to Dr. Samuel Eliot, the President of the American Unitarian Association. Eliot agreed to support their work to start a new religious movement in Czechoslovakia. Norbert and Majà left for Prague on June 30, 1921.

By February 1922, Norbert and Majà had organized the Liberal Religious Fellowship. Majà was ordained as a minister in 1926. The Czech government in 1930 officially recognized the Unitarian Church of Czechoslovakia. By 1940, the church had 3,200 members and six fellowships. In addition, 8,000 Czechs considered themselves to be Unitarian.

Quite memorable in all of this was something that happened on June 24, 1923. Norbert and Majà created a Flower Festival. Each member who came to that Sunday service brought a flower and placed it in one of several vases. Then, during a moving ceremony, Norbert blessed the flowers saying, “Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these, thy messengers of fellowship and love. May they remind us …of the value of …friendship as one of thy most precious gifts.” The service also included singing some hymns that Norbert wrote. (Did you know he wrote 90 hymns, and three are in our hymnal?) At the end of the service, people took a different flower home with them.

Unfortunately, war came to Europe again. In 1939, shortly before the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, Majà left for the United States to lecture and raise funds for a joint Unitarian and Society of Friends program to help refugees. When Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in September 1939, Majà could not return home. In 1940, she introduced the Flower Festival to the First Unitarian Church in Cambridge, MA. When she finished the lecture tour, she worked as a minister for three years in New Bedford, MA.

Majà learned after the war that Norbert had been arrested by the Gestapo in 1941 and killed in 1942. Rather than returning to Czechoslovakia, she remained in the United States and worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, helping displaced persons settle in Yugoslavia, Egypt, and Palestine.

The Flower Festival became the Flower Communion and is observed yearly by many of our congregations. This moving ritual from Norbert and Majà, which is now 100 years old (2023), continues to bless Unitarian Universalism. As UU minister Richard Gilbert wrote, “The flowers have the gift of language. In the meadow, they speak of freedom….”

*Note: The spelling of Majà with the accent mark is based on a 1926 photo of her signature*.

Source: Touchstones

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group

Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl as follows. Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

“The very ritual practices that the New Atheists dismiss as costly, inefficient and irrational turn out to be a solution to one of the hardest problems humans face: cooperation without kinship.” Jonathan Haidt

“Rituals are a good signal to your unconscious that it is time to kick in.” Anne Lamott

“For me starting the day without a pot of tea would be a day ...out of kilter.” Bill Drummond

“Rituals keep us from forgetting what must not be forgotten and keep us rooted in a past from which we must not be disconnected.” Tony Campolo

“The function of ritual, as I understand it, is to give form to human life, not in the way of a mere surface arrangement, but in depth.” Joseph Campbell

“Any ritual is an opportunity for transformation. To do a ritual, you must be willing to be transformed in some way. The inner willingness is what makes the ritual come alive and have power. If you aren’t willing to be changed by the ritual, don’t do it.” Starhawk

“Ritual consists of the external practices of spirituality that help us become more receptive and aware of the closeness of our lives to the sacred. …I can light a candle because I need the light or because the candle represents the light I need.” Christina Baldwin

“Ritual affirms the common patterns, the values, the shared joys, risks, sorrows, and changes that bind a community together.” Starhawk

“Religion becomes a hollow shell of its former self when ritual remains and thoughtful reflection disappears.” Nouman Ali Khan

“The first ritual that you do during the day is the highest leveraged ritual, by far, because it has the effect of setting your mind, and setting the context, for the rest of your day.” Eben Pagan

“Ritual is necessary for us to know anything.” Ken Kesey

“Ritual links together our ancestors and descendants, those who went before with those will come after us.” Starhawk

“It seemed to be a necessary ritual that he should prepare himself for sleep by meditating under the solemnity of the night sky... a mysterious transaction between the infinity of the soul and the infinity of the universe.” Victor Hugo

“…Ritual …is a symbolic transformation of experiences that no other medium can adequately express.” Susanne Katherina Langer

“Bedtime rituals for children ease the way to the elsewhere of slumber—teeth brushing and pajamas, the voice of a parent reading, the feel and smell of the old blanket or toy, the nightlight glowing in a corner.” Siri Hustvedt

“I have the greatest love for the rituals of organized religion—the sense of community and belonging it can confer to people.” Kabir Bedi

“I have rituals for cleaning out resentments, disappointments, heartbreak, depression, and for work.” Hubert Selby, Jr.

“It’s so important to engage your kids to create rituals and moments that they will always remember.” Josie Bissett

“Ritual is, therefore, a primary site of contact between self and society, a place where our individual selves are transformed into collective selves.” Mark Pedelty

“In our society, many of the old rituals have lost much of their power. New ones have not arisen.” R.D. Laing

“We not only nurture our sacred relationships through ritual, but we are nurtured by them as well. In ritual, we move, and we are moved.” Allison Leigh Lilly

“In addition to facilitating a sense of security and predictability, a childhood history steeped in family rituals also provides a robust template of belonging and meaning to take into our adult years. Who doesn’t want that for the next generation?’ Sabina Read

“When we light a candle in our ritual space, we ignite a flame within ourselves. When we pour water or burn incense as offerings, we offer ourselves as well, to soak into the earth or rise in gentle wisps of smoke towards the sky.” Allison Leigh Lilly

“The telling and hearing of stories is a bonding ritual that breaks through illusions of separateness and activates a deep sense of our collective interdependence.” Annette Simmons

“Rituals are those repeated actions done again and again in the interest of things like focus, grounding, tradition, cultural symbolism, predictable life rhythms, and feeling a part of something.” Craig Kelley

“It reminds me that ritual and symbol are as necessary to human beings as air and water. They mark us as human, and give us identity.” Kathleen Norris

It is important to embody the sentiments and fundamental ideas of religion. Life can no more dispense with symbols than language with metaphors: a ritual is an acted metaphor. Alexandre Rudolphe Vinet

“Ritual is able to hold the long-discarded shards of our stories and make them whole again. It has the strength and elasticity to contain what we cannot contain on our own, what we cannot face in solitude.” Francis Weller

A handshake. A kiss. A coronation. A parade. A dance. A meal. A graduation. A mass. A ritual is the performance of an intuition, the rehearsal of a dream, the playing of a game.” Frederick Buechner

“Stories and rituals are used in different cultures to help individuals and communities heal from trauma.” Oscar Perez

“Rituals are like electrically powered transmitters sending stimulating sparks of electric current or inspirational feelings that connect us to our inner being or soul.” Wes Adamson

**Sitting in Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions).*

**Reading:** “When tea becomes ritual, it takes its place at the heart of our ability to see greatness in small things. Where is beauty to be found? In great things that, like everything else, are doomed to die, or in small things that aspire to nothing, yet know how to set a jewel of infinity in a single moment?” *Muriel Barbery*

**Living the Questions**

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. In general, what is your attitude toward ritual? Why?
2. In terms of society, why are rituals important?
3. In what ways did rituals impact or influence you when you were young?
4. What rituals have been handed down to you? How have/can you pass meaningful rituals onward?
5. Did you or do you have personal rituals that were/are meaningful? What is an example? What made/makes it important?
6. In terms of rites of passage in your own life, which has had the strongest impact on you? Why?
7. What rituals of civil religion do you find meaningful? Why? Are there any that bother you? Why?
8. Have you been subjected to bad rituals? What was the occasion? What made them bad?
9. What makes for good rituals?
10. Have you led a ritual for a group? What was it like? What did you enjoy? Was there anything you found challenging? Why?

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person for the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

**Extinguishing Chalice:** (Elizabeth Selle Jones) We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

**Closing Words:** (Rev. Philip R. Giles)

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*