



Opening and Closing Words for UUCSJ Learning Circles

This collection of resources is designed to help you easily find opening and closing words for your learning circle. You can also use them as brief readings if you'd like to build a meditative break into your discussions. You may wish to light a chalice or a candle at the start of your time together, which can help center the group as you begin each gathering.

Gathering Words

1. "There is a common misunderstanding among the human beings who have ever been born on earth that the best way to live is to try to avoid pain and just try to get comfortable. You see this even in insects and animals and birds. All of us are the same. A much more interesting, kind and joyful approach to life is to begin to develop our curiosity, not caring whether the object of our curiosity is bitter or sweet. To lead to a life that goes beyond pettiness and prejudice and always wanting to make sure that everything turns out on our own terms, to lead a more passionate, full, and delightful life than that, we must realize that we can endure a lot of pain and pleasure for the sake of finding out who we are and what this world is, how we tick and how our world ticks, how the whole thing just is." -- Pema Chödrön, American Buddhist teacher

2. "[Sometimes] we ring the hollow bell of selfishness rather than absorb the stillness that surrounds the world, hovering over all the restlessness and fear of life – the secret stillness that precedes our birth and succeeds our death. Futile self-indulgence brings us out of tune with the gentle song of nature's waiting, of [humanity's] striving for salvation. Is not listening to the pulse of wonder worth silence...? We dwell on the edge of mystery and ignore it... [Our task is] to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments... [This] is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live." -- Abraham Joshua Heschel, 20th century rabbi, theologian, and civil rights activist

3. [I have found that] just being awake, alert, attentive, is no easy matter. I think it is the greatest spiritual challenge we face. Finally, I think, it is the only one... The Buddha, literally the "one who is truly awake", was, according to the most ancient Buddhist tradition, fully human, a man who through disciplined meditation saw into the heart of reality and woke up. It is said that after his enlightenment the Buddha's face shone and he was stopped on the road and asked, "Are you a god or a magician?" He answered, "No, I am not a god, nor am I a magician. I am awake." The clear implication is that most of us, most of the time, are not fully awake...

There is no question that many in the West are embarked now on the inward journey. Our cultures are thirsty for whatever it is that is named with the word spirituality. Our lives are busy. Our days hurtle by with a roar. Our rooms are piled with books to read, filled with the sound of televised news reports, with minute-by-minute coverage of baseball games and national and international disasters.... There is so much to keep up with that stopping for periods of real

stillness is increasingly difficult. We have practiced the routes of having, doing, going, making, getting and keeping so frequently that we know the terrain by heart. The ways of watchfulness and attention will take both learning and unlearning.” – Excerpt from Encountering God, from Bozeman to Banaras, by Diana Eck

4. Chalice lighting words:

May the flame that balances on the chalice today
Live not only in this circle of ours, but in our hearts.
May its light give us courage and curiosity
And illuminate the creative edges of our lives. -- Anonymous

5. Chalice lighting words:

All people are equally children of Holiness.
All can err, so stand in need of forgiveness.
All people can change, and learn more compassion.
All have a part to play in the healing of the world's pain.

May we listen well to these truths of our faith,
put our hands to the work that is ours to do,
and let our spirits flourish in the blessings of this one life. -- Rev. Kathleen McTigue,
contemporary UU minister

6. Often we are found in our grief and comforted,
calmed by some kindness,
brought alive again by beauty
that catches us undefended.

Even when the sun is most thin and far,
even at the hour the storm is at its height,
we can go through;
renewal nests within sorrow,
love abides, even beyond anger, beyond death.

We are held in an embrace invisible but infinite,
moving with all creation between wholeness and fragmentation,
moving always toward the one.

Small joys and great sorrows pass
and we, with steps uncertain, move on
to whatever is next,
but continually seen, heard, held
by Life infinite and remote, intimate and abiding.

Love, do not let us go. – “Love Abides”, by Rev. Barbara Pescan, contemporary UU minister

7. Imperfection is the place where the spirit enters,
the small hole in your shirt, the loosening threads
of carpet, the ache in your soul for forgiveness.
Where the camel waits, where the eye strays,
where the hand reaches up, empty of all but breath,
is the place where the soul begins, its gravity mightier
than we may ever know. There, where the rug unravels
like a rope of time, where pockets bleed their secrets
between the seams. In a widow's eyes words appear
lit up like stars in a deep sky: If God is all we believe,
soul and sorrow and bliss, the soul is stone and lattice,
ligature and air, and it lives in the body's secret lapses.
How grateful then to know imperfection's door swinging
open and closed, how good to be humbled. -- "Imperfection", by Rachel Guido deVries

8. Only a beige slat of sun
above the horizon, like a shade pulled
not quite down. Otherwise,
clouds. Sea rippled here and
there. Birds reluctant to fly.
The mind wants a shaft of sun to
stir the grey porridge of clouds,
an osprey to stitch sea to sky
with its barred wings, some dramatic
music: a symphony, perhaps
a Chinese gong.

But the mind always
wants more than it has --
one more bright day of sun,
one more clear night in bed
with the moon; one more hour
to get the words right; one
more chance for the heart in hiding
to emerge from its thicket
in dried grasses -- as if this quiet day
with its tentative light weren't enough,
as if joy weren't strewn all around. -- "Mind Wanting More", by Holly Hughes

9. Do you belong to a religion that says humankind is not divided – except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions – and declares a brotherhood and sisterhood unbounded! [Do you belong to] the religion that knows we shall never find the fullness of the wonder and the glory of life until we are ready to share it; that we shall never have hearts big enough for the love of God until we have made them big enough for the worldwide

love of one another? As you have listened to me, have you [perhaps thought, Yes!] -- that this is your religion? If so, do not congratulate yourself. Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world in which you live; the fearful cruelties, the enmities, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need in such a world for such a faith. And if you can still say that this of which I have spoken is your faith, then ask yourself this question: What are you doing with it? - A. Powell Davies, 20th century Unitarian minister

10. If we take something to be the truth, we may cling to it so much that even if the truth comes and knocks at our door, we won't want to let it in. We have to be able to transcend our previous knowledge the way we climb up a ladder. If we are on the fifth rung and think that we are very high, there is no hope for us to step up to the sixth. We must learn to transcend our own views.
-- from *The Heart Sutra*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist teacher

11. All [people] are interdependent. Every nation is an heir of a vast treasury of ideas and labor to which both the living and the dead of all nations have contributed. Whether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally "in the red". We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women... In a real sense, all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother, [or sister]. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."
-- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., from *Where Do We Go from Here?*, 1967 [adapted]

Closing Words

1. In every gathering, in any chance meeting on the street
there is a shine, an elegance rising up.
Today I recognized that that jewel-like beauty
is the presence, our loving confusion,
the glow in which watery clay gets brighter than fire...
The mind, this globe of awareness, is a starry universe
that when you push off from it with your foot,
a thousand new roads come clear, as you yourself do at dawn,
sailing through the light. -- Rumi, 13th century Sufi poet

2. It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings. -- "The Real Work", by Wendell Berry

3. What we call a beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from....

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. --T.S. Eliot, 20th century American poet

Is my soul asleep?
Have those beehives that work in the night stopped?
And the waterwheel of thought,
is it going around now, cups empty,
carrying only shadows?

No, my soul is not asleep.
It is awake, wide awake.
It neither sleeps nor dreams, but watches,
its eyes wide open [to] far-off things, and listens
at the shores of the great silence. -- Antonio Machado, 20th century Spanish poet

4....the secret names
of all we meet who lead us deeper
into our labyrinth
of valleys and mountains, twisting valleys
and steeper mountains --
...those we meet for only
one crucial moment, gaze to gaze,
or for years know and don't recognize
but of whom later a word
sings back to us
as if from high among leaves...
drawing us from tree to tree
towards the time and the unknown place
where we shall know
what it is to arrive. --Denise Levertov, 20th century American poet

5. Keep walking, though there's no place to get to.
Don't try to see through the distances. That's not for human beings.
Move within, but don't move the way fear makes you move.
Today, like every other day,
we wake up empty and frightened.
Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground. -- Rumi, 13th century Sufi poet

6. We are not in pursuit of formalities
or fake religious laws,
For through the stairway of existence
we have come to God's door.

We are people who need to love,
because love is the soul's life,
love is simply creation's greatest joy.
Through the stairway of existence,
Oh, through the stairway of existence...
have we all now come
to the Beloved's door. -- "The Stairway of Existence", Hafiz, 13th century Sufi poet

7. As the brick of the afternoon stores the rose heat
of the journey
as the rose buds a green room to breathe
and blossoms like the wind
as the thin birches whisper their stories of the wind....
as the leaves of the hedge store the light
the day thought it had lost...
as the chorus of the earth find their eyes in the sky
and unwrap them to each other in the teeming dark,
hold everything dear. -- Gareth Evans

8. May we be guides for those on the path
A boat, a raft, a bridge for those who wish to cross the flood;

May we be lamps for those in need of light,
resting places for those who are weary,
A vase of plenty, a tree of miracles.

May we bring sustenance and kindness
until all beings are freed from sorrow
and all are awakened. --Based on the words of Shantideva, 8th century Buddhist sage

9. In the morning as the storm begins to blow away
the clear sky appears for a moment and it seems to me
that there has been something simpler than I could ever
believe
simpler than I could have begun to find words for
not patient not even waiting no more hidden
than the air itself that became part of me for a while
with every breath and remained with me unnoticed

something that was here unnamed unknown in the days
and the nights not separate from them
not separate from them as they came and were gone
it must have been here neither early nor late then
by what name can I address it now holding out my thanks --“Just Now”, W.S. Merwin, 20th
century American poet

10. When the apostle Paul said we were to 'pray without ceasing',]perhaps what he meant was that we are to live as if everything we say and do is a prayer, calling others to life, to love and to being. I can only imagine...that when life is lived this way, an enormous amount of spiritual energy is loosed into the body politic of the whole society. I can imagine that this energy is an agent in bringing wholeness and even healing...when we express our love, concern and caring in thought, word and deed, then somehow that expression has the opportunity to make a difference." -- John Shelby Spong, contemporary Episcopal priest

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