**RECLAIMING OUR INNOCENCE**

Greenville UU Fellowship

Covenant Group Session Plan

**Welcome, Chalice Lighting:** *Here we are, together in this space. By our love and by our covenant, we make this a holy place. We light the chalice of Unitarian Universalism in honor of the light that lives in each of us, the light that shines among us, and the light we bring into the world.*

**Opening Reading**

We often have need of a profound philosophy to restore to our feelings their original state of innocence, to find our way out of the rubble of things alien to us, to begin to feel for ourselves and to speak for ourselves, and I might almost say, to exist ourselves. ~G.C. Lichtenberg

**Personal Check In:** Share something from your life since we last met and how you are feeling now.

**Readings (Words from the Common Bowl: Quotes/Readings)**

**Questions to prompt and guide discussion.**

1. In what ways have you lost innocence, why might you need to reclaim it?
2. Is it possible to reclaim your innocence? How can you do it?
3. How do you balance innocence and living spontaneously in the moment with the very real need to plan ahead, foresee consequences, and be responsible?
4. What do you risk by having childlike innocence?
5. How do you hold on to innocence and a basic trust in the goodness of the universe when life deals you bad hands and knocks us down repeatedly?
6. How do you help children grow in wisdom without destroying their innocence?

**Silence**

**Sharing:** (Deep listening--no cross talk) This is a time to speak without interruption and for deep listening. Please share one or more of your responses to the session questions.

**Sitting in Silence:** Breathe together in silence for two minutes.

**Open Discussion:** (Cross talk allowed) This is a time to respond to something another person said or to relate additional thoughts that may have occurred as others shared.

**Announcements/Plans**

**Personal Check Out:**

*How would you like to be held in heart and mind before we meet again?*

**Closing Reading:**

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.

Through the unknown, unremembered gate when the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river the voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree, not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)?

And all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one.

~T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

**READINGS**

The innocent and the beautiful have no enemy but time. ~William Butler Yeats

That's what it takes to be a hero, a little gem of innocence inside you that makes you want to believe that there still exists a right and wrong, and that decency will somehow triumph in the end. ~Elise Hand

Innocence plays in the backyard of ignorance. ~Anonymous

All things truly wicked start from innocence. ~Ernest Hemingway

Bad company is as instructive as licentiousness. One makes up for the loss of one's innocence with the loss of one's prejudices. ~Denis Diderot

Every life is a march from innocence, through temptation, to virtue or vice. ~Lyman Abbott

I can sing very comfortably from my vantage point because a lot of the music is about a loss of innocence; there's innocence contained in you but there's also innocence in the process of being lost. ~Bruce Springsteen

Willful ignorance is not innocence, but sin. ~Robert Browning Hamilton

Once you start asking questions, innocence is gone. ~Mary Astor

It’s ironic. The knowledge that makes us cherish innocence makes innocence unattainable. ~Irving Howe

The pain comes from knowing that we have never been safe, and therefore will never be safe again. It comes from knowing we can never be so ignorant again. It comes from knowing we can never be children again. Losing innocence. Remembering heaven. That is the essence of hell. ~John Jakes

Prudishness is pretense of innocence without innocence. Women have to remain prudish as long as men are sentimental, dense, and evil enough to demand of them eternal innocence and lack of education. For innocence is the only thing which can ennoble lack of education. ~Friedrich Von Schlegel

Cheap thrill: Moral outrage reveling in its own innocence and in the guilt of those wicked Others. ~Mason Cooley

Innocence is lovely in children, because it is in harmony with its nature; but our path in life is not backward but onward, and virtue can never be the offspring of mere innocence. If we are to progress in the knowledge of good, we must also progress in the knowledge of evil. Every experience of evil brings its own temptation, and according to the degree in which the evil is recognized and the temptations resisted, will be the value of the character into which the individual will develop. ~Margaret Ward

If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst. ~Thomas Hardy

The unexamined life is not worth living. ~Socrates

***Session Pre- Reading***

In the Biblical creation myth, God told Adam and Eve not to eat from the apple tree because it would give them knowledge of good and evil. The Fall may have come in the moment Eve decided to disobey; but the deeper meaning of the fall from grace or innocence for us is in the understanding that we can’t know what goodness is until we understand how evil exists as its shadow. With the knowledge of evil, the garden is gone. It happens when a child first encounters badness in a person, or in the world. Mommy screams, Daddy hits, someone betrays your trust. It’s an awful moment, and there is no wholeness after that. It happens the first time you realize there is badness in yourself—that you can do something you know is hurtful, a time when you are mean and say to yourself, “I knew that was going to hurt, and I did it anyway.” Maybe you hurt an animal, to see what would happen, or you hit your brother or sister or friend. It happens when we feel hatred, or envy, when we steal, when we are destructive. It happens every time we choose to move away from our essential goodness.

 The story goes on to tell us that Adam and Eve’s response to their new knowledge was to realize they were naked—they felt exposed and ashamed, and their first response was to hide, to cover themselves up. You know those dreams where you show up in public naked or wearing only your underwear? Those are exposure dreams, and they are nearly universal. So many of us carry this deep feeling that there is something wrong with us, deep shame for things we have done wrong, for ways we believe we don’t measure up. Think of all the ways we hide and work so hard to cover it up. How many times have you thought to yourself, or heard someone say: “If they really knew me, they would hate me.” Is that true? Is that thought a way we hate ourselves?

To some extent a healthy sense of our own good and evil and shame, is useful—we need it so we don’t do things that damage our lives or the lives of people around us, so we don’t do shameful things without a twinge. But that sense of guilt and shame can be paralyzing, and we need to be able to do something with it. Maybe this is a spring of wisdom, and a path of return to deep innocence—learning to let go of the guilt and turn, to come back to the right direction, to the person we were, the person we most truly are inside. Deep spiritual practice and the twelve-step programs teach us to look hard at the things we’ve done, to confess, to make amends. In those moments, as we confess, as we let go, as we forgive, ask forgiveness, and forgive ourselves, we can glimpse the land of our Soul. And as we turn from destructive desire, greed, pride, cruelty, self-righteousness and cynicism we can come back into right relationship and lightness of being; we feel cleansed and whole, and we are restored to sanity.

 This kind of innocence is deeper and wiser and maybe truer than the innocence of ignorance—and we can experience it as rebirth and homecoming.

Kathleen Anderson 2010