Soul Matters

The Gift of Welcome

Small Group
September 2023

The Gift of Welcome

It seems to go without saying. To be welcoming, we've got to think big.

Notice how often we speak about "*widening* the circle" and "*making more* room." We place a priority on *expanding* our minds by welcoming new experiences and new ideas. Those that help usher in love are "*big-hearted*." Those who help us welcome change are "the ones with *the big idea*." Ask someone what image goes with welcoming and they will surely say a person with *open arms*.

So bigness, yes, let's be sure to follow that road.

But what about that smaller trial? The one that runs right alongside the wide road? The one harder to notice and certainly hard to travel? The one that whispers, "Don't forget the work of becoming smaller"?

We're learning that this path must be traversed as well.

For instance, those of us who are white are realizing that to truly welcome diversity, we must shrink and de-center our voices. We long-timers are discovering that welcoming newcomers requires right-sizing our needs and putting our preferences second. The tree huggers have been telling us for years that we can't save the wider world without shrinking our wants. The spiritual masters remind us that feeling at home in the universe demands that we see ourselves as a tiny part of a greater whole, rather than believing that the whole world revolves around us. The brilliant confess that their secret is the smallness of humility and the willingness to admit when they are wrong. And isn't it downsizing and living simply that allows us to welcome in more experience, adventure and peace? Of course, there's also the work of downsizing our egos enough to admit mistakes. Without that how can we ever welcome in forgiveness and the work of repair?

Bottom line: There is a deep spiritual connection between the smallness of self and the expansiveness of relationship. It's a curious and wonderful truth: the road to a wider welcome often starts with limiting our own size. By becoming "smaller," we paradoxically are better able to welcome in and receive the gift of "more."

So friends, as you journey this month, think big!
But also, stay small.

Our Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, these exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us*!

Pick the exercise that speaks to you the most. Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did and what gift it gave you.

Option A

A Week of Welcoming Gratefulness & The Present Moment

Welcoming the present moment is one of the most important of all spiritual practices. Yet, it's also one of the hardest. So to make it a bit easier, we've put together a list of videos to help you.

For one week at least, start your day by listening to one of these videos. You can journal after listening or just sit quietly with what the video opens up for you. Think of this as a morning meditation. Be sure to give some thought to your surroundings. Some will listen while sitting at your kitchen table sipping your first cup of coffee. Others will listen while sitting on your back porch looking out as the morning presents itself.

During the week, pay attention to how beginning your day this way alters the way you travel through it. Consider journaling to capture your thoughts. Come to your group ready to share 2-3 examples of the difference the videos made.

- A Good Day, Brother David Steindl-Rast: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpkEvBtyL7M&t=47s
- The Meaning of Life, Sam Harris: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UjE2A1He58
- This is what was bequeathed us, Gregory Orr: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrvMpAavaAw
- Grateful Voices - James: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFi-LzWHH98
- The Power Is Here Now, Alexia Chellun: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rJfU1A6cxs
- Live Fully Now, Alan Watts: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdqVF7-8wng
- Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude, Ross Gay: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uURnrX_-v6o&t=416s
- Gratitude, Mary Oliver: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XKg514_K3s&t=65s
- This is Water, David Foster Wallace: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eC7xzavzEKY
- We Are Going to Die, Richard Dawkins: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOXMjCnKwb4&t=11s

Option B

Welcome in the Work (and gift) of Meditation

If you want to welcome mindfulness in a more formal way, consider doing some guided meditations for a week. To help, we've assembled a handful of guided meditations below. They are by psychologist and mindfulness teacher, Shauna Shapiro. Before you jump into the list, watch these two videos to better understand what mindfulness practice is and what gifts it offers.

About Mindfulness Meditation:

- Mindfulness, the Brain & Your Happiness Set Point: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AqgMo1P05E
- A Joyful Mind - Mindfulness Documentary: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBX92PT3264

Guided Meditations:

- Always Here, the power of the present moment: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8sxeRvJu9g
- Morning I love you med: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUVzB2q39Ak
- Self Kindness: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLq0sB0vQO4
- Setting Intentions: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ms3xIVsUSg
- Calming the Anxious Mind: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxmOzEGknZA
- Forgiveness and Letting Go: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acF4fPLTJiQ

Option C
Welcome in the World Nearby

Alastair Humphreys is an adventurer. A serious one. He's cycled around the world, rowed the Atlantic, walked across southern India, just to name a few. But lately he's gone from big to small, from global and grand to local and familiar. He ordered a 12-mile square map of the area where he lives, and then he spent a year exploring each half-mile square on that map. The result? The world around him came alive again. He tells the story of this local adventure here.

How might you do a bit of the same this month? How might you welcome in the "world nearby" more deeply?!

There's no one right way. Don't get caught up on exploring *a 12-mile* square area; the 3–5-mile radius around your home is likely plenty. Maybe you look for a road you rarely travel on and walk or bike it so you can take it in slowly. Maybe you go to one of your favorite parks or coffee shops and soak it in until you notice something new or see it in a new light. Or how about spending a couple weeks taking pictures of your neighborhood, capturing it from a new perspective or placing it in a new frame. Or you could go on a treasure hunt to document as many of the unique sounds of your local world. And what about drawing or painting it?

Whatever approach you use, the goal is to welcome in the world around you in a new way, and by doing so to enable that nearby world to come alive!

Come to your group ready to share what surprised you most and what gift the exercise gave you.

Option D
Welcome the Unwelcomed with Words

Many spiritual traditions call us to welcome the unwelcomed. Here's how the Buddhist teacher, Pema Chödrön, describes this holy work:

> *"Accepting something isn't the same as liking it. To accept a feeling that we habitually associate with discomfort doesn't mean we immediately turn around and start enjoying it. It means being okay with it as part of the texture of human life."*

The poet Pádraig Ó Tuama tackles this work with words, in his poem, The Facts of Life, found here: https://medium.com/bricology/the-facts-of-life-a-poem-by-p%C3%A1draig-%C3%B3-tuama-ea7111ae2f72

Notice how Ó Tuama begins with a list of "facts" that are mostly hard and unwanted, but as the poem goes on, he weaves in more and more "facts" that are hopeful and full of peaceful acceptance.

So using Ó Tuama's poem as a guide, write your own "Facts of Life poem." Begin it with a list of the hard and unwelcome facts you've encountered and slowly weave in the hopeful facts and insights that make up, as Pema Chodron says, the ***full*** texture of your life.

Be sure to note that Ó Tuama gives you an easy structure to work with by starting each sentence with "That…"

Option E
Explore The Journey of Welcoming Yourself

When it comes to the journey of welcoming ourselves, Zen priest and Sensei, Rev. angel Kyodo williams, is one of the wisest guides out there. So for this exercise, digest this interview with her on self-belonging: https://revangel.com/the-alchemy-of-belonging-podcast/

Here are some suggestions to guide your experience:

- As you listen to the interview, try to identify the 2-3 quotes or moments that stuck out the most for you. Then ask yourself, "How are these stand out pieces trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge?"
- After you are done listening, spend some time paying attention to your body and identify how you are feeling. Write down all the various feelings you are having. Take your time to be sure to get in touch with the hard-to-notice, as well as the easy-to-notice feelings. Reflect on what wisdom these feelings might contain.
- Ask yourself, "What do I want to change because of this interview?"

Option F
Ask Them About Welcome

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to have conversations about them with people who are close to you. It not only deepens our conversations but also our relationships.

Below is a list of "welcome questions" to help you on your way. Be sure to let your conversation partner know in advance that this won't be a typical conversation. Telling them a bit about Soul Matters will help set the stage.

Come to your group ready to share what surprised you about the conversation(s) and what gift or insight it gave you. As always, keep a lookout for how your inner voice is trying to send you a word of comfort or challenge through these conversions with others.

Welcome Questions:

- What's one of the biggest changes you've welcomed into your life *that few people know about*? Who surprisingly tried to stand in the way of that change? Who surprisingly supported the change?
- Has welcoming change gotten easier or harder as you've grown older?
- What do you know now about welcoming in the present moment that you didn't know when you were younger?
- Tell me about a time that you welcomed a new piece of music into your life? Why was it helpful that this piece of music "knocked on our door" at just the right time?
- Have you ever welcomed in a moment so fully that you suddenly felt one with it?
- Tell me about self-acceptance: What part of you is the hardest for you to welcome with open arms?
- What would you tell someone younger than yourself about welcoming in grief?
- What part of you do you wish your family of origin would have welcomed more enthusiastically?
- We all have past friendships we wish we could have taken deeper, that were cut short because we moved or other life events took priority. If you could welcome one of those unfulfilled friendships back into your life, which one would it be?
- What is your third favorite way to welcome in joy?

Option G
Welcome in a Wider World of Music

Did you know that we stop exploring new music as we age?! It turns out that our musical tastes begin to crystallize as early as age 13 or 14 and they become largely locked in place by our early 20s!

So let's unlock that door and welcome in some new music!

We suggest you do that by exploring these two music websites:

- NPR Tiny Desk Concerts: https://www.youtube.com/@nprmusic
- Soundcheck Live Performances & Conversations: https://www.newsounds.org/shows/soundcheck

Go through them methodically or just close your eyes and randomly click. However you explore is up to you.

But along the way, try some of these intentional listening practices:

- Pause when a song strongly grabs you or strongly turns you off. Then try to articulate why each is the case. To go deep, keep asking "Why is that?" after each of your answers.
- Pay attention to whether hearing the musician talk about their music changes your opinion of it.
- Go through the songs with a friend, partner or child. Make it a game by having each of you rank the songs on a scale of 1-10. Dig into and discuss those moments when your rankings are far off and when they are the same. What does that say about not only each of you but also your relationship with each other?

Option H
Which Welcome Quote Calls to You & Why?

Sometimes we read a quote and it perfectly captures what's going on for us right now. Or it allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month reading through the quotes in the *Companion Pieces* section below to ***find the one that best illuminates your journey with The Gift of Welcome.***

We encourage you to use the same discernment practice with these quotes as you do with the packet's list of questions:

- **Read through the list of quotes** a few times, noting which ones "shimmer" (i.e. call to you or have an emotional gravitational pull for you). It often helps to circle or star these quotes that stand out.
- With each reading, **narrow your focus** in on those that stick out, until you finally **settle on the one quote** that pulls at you the most.
- Then make space to **reflect** on the gift, challenge or insight your chosen quote is offering you.
- Some of us may want to **go further** and capture your reflections with journaling or creative expression.

Come to your group ready to share your quote and the journey it took you on.

Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for deep reflection. They are meant not so much to be answered as to take you somewhere.

Read through the list 2-3 times until one question sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions "shimmers."

Then reflect on with questions such as:

- *What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?*
- *How might my inner voice be trying to speak to me through it?*
- *What memory is the question inviting me to revisit? And why?*
- *How might Life be speaking through the question to offer me a word of comfort or challenge?*

Often writing out your thoughts enables you to go deeper. Sometimes it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with.

***A note about self-care:** Often these questions take us to a vulnerable space. It is OKAY to ignore the questions that may be triggering – or lean in if that feels safe.*

** ** **

1. Who welcomed you in when you needed it most? How has that gift changed you? What would you say to the person if you had the chance?
2. What do you know now about welcoming in the present moment that you didn't know when you were younger?
3. What if, as some say, God is the force that disrupts our comfortable plans and notions? What if wholeness and holiness only leak into our lives when we welcome those moments of life being turned on its head?
4. What would you tell someone younger than yourself about welcoming in grief?
5. Have you ever welcomed in a moment so fully that you suddenly felt one with it?
6. What part of you do you wish your family of origin would have welcomed more enthusiastically?
7. Is welcoming in an awareness of death helpful?
8. Do you know what it's like to encounter a welcome that requires you to remove parts of yourself to belong?
9. Theologian Joan D. Chittister said, "Hospitality is simply love on the loose." Does that ring true for you?
10. Has welcoming change gotten easier or harder as you've grown older?
11. What part of yourself is hardest to welcome in and embrace with compassion: Your vulnerable self? Your flawed self? Your easily frightened self? Your angry self?
12. Has welcoming the forgiveness of others gotten easier or harder as you've gotten older?
13. We all have past friendships we wish we could have taken deeper, that were cut short because we moved or other life events took priority. If you could welcome one of those unfulfilled friendships back into your life, which one would it be? And why?
14. What is trying to get itself welcomed into your life right now?
15. What new ideas have you welcomed in *since* you've been a UU?
16. If you were asked to name 2 ways you could help make your church more welcoming, what would they be?
17. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, helping you to open up to new ways of understanding and receiving The Gift of Welcome.

Word Roots & Definitions

Welcome dates back to Anglo-Saxon days, from *Beowulf*. The word was originally *wilcuma* in Old English, a combination of *wil* (pleasure) plus *cuma* (guest). The verb form, *wilcumian*, meant to receive someone or something with pleasure.

Wise Words

I was beginning to learn that home is the space within us and between us where we feel safe—and brave. It is not a physical space as much as it is a field of being.
Valarie Kaur

If you go without belonging for long enough, if you've known the sting of betrayal, you can end up manufacturing an identity from your alienation. To protect yourself from the risk of exclusion, you begin initiating distance on your own by calling yourself 'loner' or 'independent.' But a life lived with trust only in the self is exhausting.
Cole Arthur Riley

He drew a circle that shut me out--
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!
Edwin Markham

[Hospitality] is the first step toward dismantling the barriers of the world. Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudiced world around one heart at a time.
Joan D Chittister

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care…
Naomi Shihab Nye

I believe every inch of America is sacred, from sea to shining sea. I believe we make it holy by who we welcome and by how we relate to each other. Call it my Muslim eyes on the American project. "We made you different nations and tribes that you may come to know one another," says the Qur'an.
Eboo Patel

America needs to reconcile with itself and do the work of apology: To say to indigenous, black, and brown people, we take full ownership for what we did. To say, we owe you everything. To say, we see how harm runs through generations. To say, we own this legacy and will not harm you again. To promise this non-repetition of harm would require nothing less than transitioning the nation as a whole. It would mean retiring the old narrative about who we are—a city on a hill—and embracing a new narrative of an America longing to be born, a nation whose promise lies in the future, a nation we can only realize by doing the labor: reckoning with the past, reconciling with ourselves, restructuring our institutions, and letting those who have been most harmed be the ones to lead us through the transition.
Valarie Kaur, on our society welcoming in the work of apology

A real conversation always contains an invitation. You are inviting another person to reveal herself or himself to you, to tell you who they are or what they want… A year or so ago, I found myself in exactly this dynamic, my daughter's bedroom door slammed shut just as I was about to say a last, deeply satisfying unhelpful thing. But I caught myself… I gave it the old 10-minute cooldown time, made tea and a plate of cookies… Then I knocked on her door and said in a very different, more invitational voice, "Come on, Charlotte, I've made tea. Let's go and have a talk." As soon as I put the tray down and we sat next to each other, almost by accident I happened to say exactly the right thing—I said, "Charlotte, tell me one thing you'd like me to stop doing as a father. And tell me one thing you'd like me to do more of." She suddenly gazed up at me with a lovely look in her eyes, one I knew from her very early infancy. She was engaged again because at last I was really inviting her to tell me who she had become—not who she had been or who I wanted her to be—but who she was now.
David Whyte

Hospitality is simply love on the loose.
Joan D. Chittister

Hospitality is a form of worship.
Babylonian Talmud

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.
Hebrews 13.1 - Christianity

Jung once said he began calling God all those "things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions, and change the course of my life for better or for worse." The divine is that power which disrupts everything. What if our practice were to court a similar holy disruption? To welcome in everything which challenges my perspective on how the world works, which upsets all the plans I have for myself, and turns them on their heads?
Christine Valters Paintner

We belong to every part of our lives and every part of our lives belongs to us. Even the failures. The cruelty. The betrayals. The addictions. The cowardice. Until we embrace and welcome back those scared and tender parts with the kindness and forgiveness we so generously give to others, we will never be whole. We will never be home.
Rev. Scott Tayler

Ah, Grief, I should not treat you
like a homeless dog
who comes to the back door…
I should trust you.
I should coax you
into the house and give you
your own corner…
Denise Levertov

It's amazing really. As a human being all you have to do is enumerate exactly the way you don't feel at home in the world, and the moment you've uttered the exact dimensionality of your exile, you are already on your way home.
David Whyte

This is going to sound crazy. Say yes to everything. Accept [and welcome in] all offers. Go along with the plan. Support someone else's dream. Say: yes"; "right"; "sure"; "I will"; "okay"; "of course"; "YES!" ... When the answer to all questions is yes, you enter a new world, a world of action, possibility, and adventure.
Patricia Ryan Madson

Music

Two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. They are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Click here for the Spotify playlist on Welcome.
Click here for all Spotify playlists.
Click here for the YouTube playlist on Welcome.
Click here for all the YouTube playlists.

Videos & Podcasts

What Makes You Feel "Welcomed Home"?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWt76WqRCVs

Love Reaches Out
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvlPa28cVfA
A visual and musical meditation asking us, "How is love calling you to reach out and welcome others in?

Lost Together
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HNFqeZI-J4
A meditation on the path of welcoming in all the different parts of ourselves

Departing the Quiet with Cole Arthur Riley
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibvaV5apMmA
On finding and offering welcome through the words of blessing & prayer.

The Black Thought Project
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Bj7GpwA0Vw
On welcoming and centering Blackness
Related podcast

Welcoming Stories
http://www.firstpersonamerican.org/stories_welcoming.html
A video series encouraging Americans to become more welcoming by inviting immigrants to share their story about someone who made a big difference in their lives when they first arrived.

Getting Called Out: How to Apologize
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8xJXKYL8pU
On welcoming the work of accountability and apology.

The Urgent Need for Compassion
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tq3C9R8HNUQ
Interview with Alok Vaid-Menon on how the gender binary separates us all from a welcoming world.

Our House is So Big, Lisa Kron
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AejUt7TdexI

Articles

Welcome to the Brink of Everything, Parker J. Palmer
https://onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-welcome-to-the-brink-of-everything/
On welcoming the gifts of age.
Excerpt: "Age brings diminishments, but more than a few come with benefits. I've lost the capacity for multitasking, but I've rediscovered the joy of doing one thing at a time. My thinking has slowed a bit, but experience has made it deeper and richer. I'm done with big and complex projects, but more aware of the loveliness of simple things…"

On the Article II Study Commission's Invitation to Welcome New Values
Introduction and context:
https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/embracing-the-living-tradition/
The proposal: https://www.uua.org/files/2023-06/Article%202%20Package.pdf

Books

Britt-Marie Was Here
Fredrik Backman

In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World
Padraig O Tuama
Related talk HERE

Four Books on Welcoming in Grief
https://www.bookpage.com/features/gentle-guides-to-healing-from-grief/

Trusting Change: Finding Our Way Through Personal and Global Transformation
Karen Hering
On welcoming change

Movies

Marcel the Shell with Shoes On
The Last Black Man in San Francisco
Antonia's Line
Taylor Mac's 24-Decade History of Popular Music
Lost in Translation
Here and Away (short film)

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as "soul_matters_circle"

Music Playlists:

Click here for links to the Spotify playlists for each month.
Click here to check out the YouTube playlists.

Packet Introduction Credit Note: Unless explicitly noted otherwise, the introductions of these packets are written by our Team Lead, Rev. Scott Tayler. Rev. Scott gives permission for his pieces to be used in any way that is helpful, including in newsletters, worship and in online service/recordings.

Soul Matters
SHARING CIRCLE

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