



Living a Life of Welcome

Small Groups: June 2014

“Pain times resistance equals suffering.” Or, in mathematical symbols: $\text{pain} \times \text{resistance} = \text{suffering}$. I heard this from Unitarian Universalist minister Arvid Straube, who in a sermon shared this teaching he had learned from a Buddhist monk. It made me think of our theme this month of Welcome, which has many facets, one of which is the quality of acceptance.

Experiencing pain comes with living. We stub our toe or cut our finger. Our hearts are broken by love, we live with the pain and grief that comes with death. We hurt ourselves, and others let us down or hurt us. Life brings pain. Thankfully, it also brings joy. But it is more difficult to welcome pain. Yet, when we resist pain, when we try to fight it, deny it or change it, it often makes it worse. For example, when we stub our toe and get upset and think of all the things we should have done differently so as not to stub our toe, not to have the pain, it makes the feeling, the emotional feeling of the pain worse. It makes us suffer. Just try this sometime. Next time you hurt yourself, bang your finger, get a paper cut, don't resist. Instead, let all of your attention simply go to where you feel the pain. Welcome it, be mindful of the pain, don't resist. See what happens. The pain will still be there, yes, but not the added emotional suffering.

Here's another example. Think of someone who frustrates you. Someone who you feel is always hurting or letting you down. Do you resist the reality of the experience? Do you continually expect the person to be different? Do you get mad everytime it happens, as if you are surprised by it again? What would happen if you just accepted the situation and the person, not expecting more. It doesn't mean the relationship would be fixed or healthy, nor that there would not be pain, but maybe, just maybe, your own suffering over it would be reduced if you were able to let go of expecting something different.

The same is true with grief. The pain of grief and loss is the worst thing we experience in life. And grief generally does not go away quickly. Yet trying to push it away, or just get over it, or getting caught in endless thoughts of how we might have avoided or prevented the loss, leads to greater suffering. It sounds strange, but welcoming grief, feeling it, attending to it, making time for it, rather than trying to push it away is the only way to really heal from grief. It is easier to welcome the good stuff, but life brings us many things that are not easy to welcome; that we do not want to welcome. Living a life of welcome is about the spiritual discipline and quality of learning to make room for what life brings us, the good and the bad, without resistance. It doesn't mean life will only be pleasant. It will not mean we don't experience pain. But it is an approach that allows us better resilience and less suffering as we develop an attitude of welcome, of openness and receptivity to life and the circumstances of our present.

Yours in love,

Rev. Susan

P.S. I credit the Rev. Laurel Hallman and the Rev. Harry Scholefield, whose chapter “The Open Heart: Welcome” from their curriculum *Living By Heart* offered many rich resources for the questions and exercises in this packet.



Living the Theme: Welcoming What Comes

Use these exercises to reflect on how you experience welcome and what living a life of welcome might mean to you. Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience welcome and what you learned from the practice.

1. **How Do You Start the Day?** The first thing we do in the morning is important in the practice of welcome. The Rev. Laurel Hallman realized that the clock radio alarm was starting her day off with reports of storms and mayhem on the highway. How do you start your day? Think about how you usually feel as your day begins. Do you wake up in dread or fear, or seeing the day as an opportunity? Try doing something in the morning that helps to bring you to a place of open heartedness toward the day. Maybe it is naming the things you are grateful for, taking a moment outside for fresh air or the sound of birds, maybe it is song to sing in the morning that helps you welcome the day.

2. **Try a New Response:** Be mindful this month of times when your immediate reaction to something is to reject it. Maybe it is your friend's suggestion of what movie to see, your partner or spouse's suggestion of what's for dinner, the new paint in a friend's house, some change in your office or neighborhood, an outfit your family member is wearing. When you notice yourself doing this, try to switch gears. See if you can shift your perspective and open yourself to the situation with welcome.

If it is a person who you always seem to react to by wanting to reject them or push them away, ask yourself how you might approach this person with more welcome. On the other hand, maybe it is a thought or emotion that when it comes you, your immediate reaction is to censor it.

Take this month to pay attention to what you immediately try to reject or censor. Note your resistance and try to take another stance. Don't fake a positive reaction, but try to take an approach of welcoming, inviting it (the person, the change, the emotion, the thought) as a guest. Even if you don't like it, see how it changes your experience to approach it with welcome, rather than resistance.

Come to your group ready to share any insights from this exercise and whether or not you were able to shift your approach, and any impact it had.



3. **Meditative Practice:** Sit with this poem by Denise Levertov which invites us to welcome things that we don't generally wish to welcome into our consciousness. She is speaking to grief, but you may wish to replace grief with another word. Are there feelings you especially try to push away, perhaps fear or sadness, anger or maybe even happiness. Read this poem through while replacing "Grief" with something you are quick to try to censor. How do you feel trying to make room to welcome what is hard to welcome? [Exercise from "Living By Heart" by Laurel Hallman]

Talking to Grief

by Denise Levertov from Life in the Forest

Ah, Grief, I should not treat you
like a homeless dog
who comes to the back door
for a crust, for a meatless bone.
I should trust you.

I should coax you into the house
and give you
your own corner,
a worn mat to lie on,
your own water dish.

You think I don't know you've been living
under my porch.
You long for your real place to be readied
before winter comes. You need
your name,
your collar and tag. You need
the right to warn off intruders
to consider my house your own
and me your person
and yourself
my own dog.



Some Questions to Think and Talk About

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. **What is something you have recently welcomed into your life?** Was it something joyful or difficult, or some of both?
2. **Describe how you usually face the tasks and activities of your life?** Is it just getting through? Are you pressured and worried? Do you approach your tasks and activities with fear or with anticipation, or with openness and joy? Does it depend on the type of task? Is family different from work? Are volunteer activities different from paid ones?
3. Unitarian Universalist minister Laurel Hallman says that welcome is always a risk. It means opening our hearts to others, to challenges. It's not just waiting for blissful calm to arrive, but takes into account even that which arrives that may be disturbing. **What do you take the gamble to welcome?**
4. **When have you felt especially welcome?** Maybe it was by a person, or to a community or within a place? What was it like to feel so welcomed?
5. Think of how your day usually begins – from the moment you wake up. **How would you describe your approach to the day?**
6. The practice of welcome is turning toward something rather than away. **When have you turned toward something or someone when you might have turned away?** What was the impact?
7. **Has there been a time when you turned away from someone or something when you might have turned toward the person or circumstance?** What was the impact?
8. **What were you taught about being welcoming and hospitable growing up?** What did "being open" mean to your family of origin? Did it mean being open to new ideas? Accepting of those who were different than you? Did your family's definition of "welcoming" have a shadow side? Don't forget to lift up the good side, what was meaningful and important about the way they embodied hospitality, even if there were challenges, too. **What learning do you hold on to still?**
9. **When has engagement with our UUCP community taught you something new about what it means to "live a life of welcome?"** When has it challenged you to embody "hospitality" or "openness" or "welcoming" in a more meaningful or needed way? Relationships, watching our fellow congregation members, hearing stories about others living out their beliefs and values, often provide the most powerful lessons and stimulate the most life-changing choices. How has this community made a difference in your life about welcoming?
10. **What do you find most difficult to welcome in your life? Are there things you really don't want to have to welcome?**



Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

Welcome

Universally, in the host/guest relationship, it is expected that the host demonstrate courtesy and grace when welcoming a guest:

English — *Welcome*
German — *Willkommen*
French — *Bienvenue*
Japanese — *Yokoso*

All imply “well come” or “good arrival.”

A smile is the universal welcome.
Max Eastman

Small cheer and great welcome makes a merry feast.
William Shakespeare

Personal spiritual welcome implies having an attitude of openness and receptivity in accepting life and the circumstances of one's present world.

Welcome and appreciate the opportunities that are presented to us:

The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience.
Emily Dickenson

Welcome anything that comes to you, but do not long for anything else.
Andre Gide

We must welcome the future, remembering that soon it will be the past; and we must respect the past, remembering that it was once all that was humanly possible.
George Santayana

Welcome the task that makes you go beyond yourself.
Frank Mcquee

Welcome the present moment as if you had invited it. Why? Because it is all we ever have.
Pema Chodron

Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.
Buddha

I would love to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding.
John O'Donohue

Welcome is a practice of becoming increasingly open-hearted. It is also a way to acknowledge ‘what is.’ We are freer in our responses when we have acknowledged the reality of our lives. Welcome is a place to begin.
Rev. Laurel Hallman, UU

You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment. Fools stand on their island of opportunities and look toward another land. There is no other land; there is no other life but this.
Henry David Thoreau



Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them—that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.

Lao Tzu

Men are born soft and supple; dead they are stiff and hard ... Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible is a disciple of death. Whoever is soft and yielding is a disciple of life.

Tao Te Ching

The Breeze At Dawn

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.

Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask for what you really want.

Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.

Don't go back to sleep.

Rumi

Prayer of St. Teresa of Avila

May today there be peace within;

May you trust God that you are where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.

May you be content knowing you are a child of God.

Let this presence settle into your bones and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love. It is there for each and everyone of us.

I think it much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers which might be wrong. I have approximate answers and possible beliefs and different degrees of uncertainty about different things, but I am not absolutely sure of anything and there are many things I don't know anything about, such as whether it means anything to ask why we're here. I don't have to know an answer. I don't feel frightened not knowing things, by being lost in a mysterious universe without any purpose, which is the way it really is as far as I can tell.

Richard Feynman

The Guest House

Jelaluddin Rumi

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*



The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the esthetic experience.

Emily Dickinson

Why I Wake Early

Mary Oliver

*Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who make the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding of the morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the
miserable and crotchety ----*

*best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens
to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,
to hold us in the great hands of light ---
good morning, good morning, good
morning.*

*Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.*

You can choose your stance to a certain extent. Certainly circumstances are tremendously important, but we get into habits of greeting the day with fear. There may be days we have to greet with fear. It is also possible, and in my experience feasible, to develop ways of facing the day with hope – regularly looking at the day as an opportunity rather than a disaster.

Rev. Harry Scholefield, UU

"welcome"...to me, an attitude of openness and gladness...I think our kids' covenant exemplifies this: "We have open minds, caring hearts, and helping hands."

Small Group Facilitator

To welcome a new day:

"Morning has Broken" by Cat Stevens

To welcome a new beginning:

"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.
(T.S. Eliot)

To welcome friends:

*"Go often to the house of your friend
For weeds choke up the unused path. (William Shakespeare)*

To welcome old age:

*Ten thousand flowers in the spring-
the moon in autumn.
Snow in winter-
If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things,
this is the best season of your life.*
(Wu Men)

To welcome community:

*The moment we cease to hold each other,
the moment we break faith with one another,
the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.*
(James Baldwin)

To welcome a new year:

And now let us believe in the new year that is given us— new, untouched, full of things that have never been.
(Rainier Maria Rilke)

One of the marvelous things about community is that it enables us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn't as individuals. When we pool our strength and share the work and the responsibility, we can welcome many people, even those in deep distress, and perhaps help them find self-confidence and inner healing.

Jane Vanier, Community and Growth



When I have felt welcome:

1. A long time ago while touring schools with a 2-person show exploring history and culture of Eastern Europe, we were scheduled to play in a small elementary school in Kentucky. Everyone is always friendly, but this time the lady who greeted us offered us a piece of toast. It was a nice gesture that might have seemed insignificant to some. Coming from this school it was an especially warm welcome. The families in this district did not have much, but offered what they had to the strangers in their midst.

2. I remember once at UUCP hearing a gay couple arrive in the door, wondering if they would be welcome. When they saw the rainbow flag, they said they knew they would be welcome.

3. I remember how in China the servers in all the hotels where we stayed were very welcoming. Often they could not speak English. But their attitude of wanting to always be helpful was much appreciated when we were so many miles from home. Smiles go a long way when there is no common language.

4. I know I feel most welcome in the homes of people who open the door with a smile, and sometimes don't have everything in the house "in its place." It seems the midwesterners have this down as far as being welcoming. When someone sees you after a long time apart, they ask about things and people you mentioned last time you met.

Connie Jahrmarkt,
UUCP Choir Director

‘Various “sages” encourage us to welcome whatever comes our way - the good, the indifferent, the difficult - make them all welcome. I struggle with this as a goal. It’s not so much that I struggle to do the welcoming - it’s that I struggle with the idea that it’s a good thing to welcome everything, that we “should” welcome everything.

The encouragement to welcome the world is often extended to mean "welcome with hospitality," "embrace what is," "want what is." There’s plenty that I don’t welcome - and I don’t see any reason why I should. This exhortation seems quite contrary to “seeking justice” in the world. If we welcome injustice, how do we work toward justice? If we welcome poverty, or child abuse, or destruction of the environment, or any one of dozens of things in the paper every morning, how do we at the same time seek to change the world. If we welcome everything, how or why does change happen?

It seems to me that we are called to co-create the universe with each other and with the mysterious powers of the universe. If we welcome everything that comes our way why would there be any motivation toward change? - Worship Associate

Online Resources

“The spiritual practice of hospitality”
Welcoming people to our congregations isn’t a duty; it’s a way to encounter the mystery and wonder of life.

David Rynick
(UUWorld, Summer 2007)

<http://www.uuworld.org/spirit/articles/23888.shtml>