

Signs of Our Faith: Being UU Every Day

Session 10: Signs of Welcome

OPENING

Materials for Activity

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Centering table
- A chime or bell
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Optional: Cloth for centering table
- Optional: Stoles, including extras for visitors

Welcome all participants.

As participants enter, greet each child in the same manner.

Lead the Opening ritual designed in Session 9, Activity 4. Or, use this Opening ritual:

If the children wear stoles for Opening and Closing, distribute stoles. Invite the children to put on their stoles. Offer any visitors a stole and explain that they may wear it during the Opening time and the Closing time if they wish. Remind the children their stoles are a sign that everyone in the group is a worship leader.

Welcome all participants. Gather everyone in a circle around the chalice table. Ring the centering chime. Ask a volunteer to light the chalice. Lead the group to say these Opening words:

We gather together as Unitarian Universalists and members of the Signs of Our Faith community.

Together, we demonstrate our open hearts by welcoming new people into our community.

STORY ~ A CALABASH OF POI

Based on "A Calabash of Poi," originally published in In the Path of the Trade Winds by Coral Wells Thorpe (New York/London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1924).

It was a sizable house, as Hawaiian houses go, perhaps fifty feet long, its side thatched with ti-leaves—a sign of rank. Its only window, about a foot square, looked out on a carefully planted taro patch, while rows of coconut palms and fruit-laden banana plants made a pretty background.

Pele, the goddess of fire, was walking down the mountainside. Today she had disguised herself especially as an old, feeble woman with a hard face, and bitterness in her eyes. She grasped her cane, and hobbled up to the big house.

"Aloha," she said to the small group of people sitting in the doorway.

"Aloha," was the reply, in a not-too-friendly voice.

Pele waited. Apparently there was to be no invitation to enter or to refresh herself.

"I have walked many miles," she said finally, using a weak voice. "I am very hungry. Perhaps you have a calabash of poi for me."

"We are very sorry, but we have no poi," said the Hawaiian chief, the master of the house. "Besides our evening meal is pau."

"Then, perhaps, a small piece of salted fish?"

"No, nor fish," was the short rejoinder.

"Then, at least, some ripe berries? I am parched with thirst?"

"Our berries are all green, as you can see for yourself, providing your eyes are not too dimmed by age."

Pele's eyes were far from dim! At other times, flashes of fire blazed in her eyes at a moment's provocation. But this time, bowing low, she made her way in silence to the gate. A few steps further down the hard road, she entered a smaller garden and paused at a small hut. The work of the day and the evening meal were over. The children played. A man and woman sat watching the last golden rays of the sun sinking behind the gentle slopes of Mauna Loa.

"Ah, I see your evening meal is past;" sighed Pele. "I am sorry for I am tired and hungry, and had hoped for a little refreshment after a day's walk down the steep mountain."

"Neither fish nor awa have we," said the poor fisherman, "but to such as we have, you are most welcome."

Even as he spoke, his wife had risen, motioned Pele to a place on the mat, and set before her a large calabash of poi.

Pele ate happily. Dipping her finger in the calabash, she raised it dripping with poi, and placed it in her mouth. She finished the entire contents in no time and, looking up, remarked:

"I am still hungry. Would it be too much to ask for another calabash?"

The woman arose and placed before her a second calabash of poi, not perhaps as large as the first, but filled to the brim.

Again Pele emptied the calabash eagerly. She sighed as she finished the last mouthful, calling attention to the empty calabash in her lap.

This time, a third calabash—smaller than the second, but quite full—was placed before her. Pele finished half of it, arose to her feet, and, uttered these words:

"When your neighbors plant taro, it shall wither on its stem. Their bananas shall die on the stalk, and their coconuts shall fall on their favorite pig. But when you plant taro at night, you may pull it in the morning. Your cane shall mature overnight and your bananas ripen in one day's sunshine. You shall have as many crops as there are days in the year!"

Then Pele trudged out of the gate and was seen to disappear toward Ha-le-mau-mau in a cloud of flame.

When the astonished fisherman walked outside his hut the next morning, yellow bananas hung on new plants, the full grown taro stood ready to be pulled, and the cane-cuttings reached to the eaves of his house. Looking across to his rich neighbors' land, he saw that, indeed, the curse of Pele had already come. In place of prosperous acres stood only sun-parched remnants of yesterday's proud crop.

In modern times, they say: "Whether you believe in the old lady Pele or not, don't ever forget to be nice to the old folks. It just might be Pele. You can't always tell."

Questions:

- What do you remember most about this story?
- Why did Pele disguise herself?

ACTIVITY 2 ~ SHUT OUT

Preparation for Activity

- Think of two short, personal anecdotes you can share, if needed, to prompt or affirm the children-one about being left out or unwelcomed, and one about an action you did to welcome someone else. Be ready to say how you felt in each situation.

Description of Activity

Tell the children that now you would like them to talk about their own experiences. Have they ever felt like Pele when she asked the first family for food, and they said "no?" Say:

Just about everyone has had a time when they felt shut out of a group. I know it has happened to me. Can you think of a time when it happened to you? When did you feel left out, or unwelcomed?

Invite children to share stories about times they felt shut out, left out of groups, or unwelcomed. Some examples might include not being picked for a team, feeling left out when a younger sibling is born, or not being invited to a party or to play a game with others. If the group is slow to share, offer your anecdote.

Encourage each storyteller to say how they felt. Acknowledge that being excluded can be painful. Assure them that everyone is left out sometimes, and many times people do not mean to be unwelcoming to each other. Sometimes, we are busy with our friends or a project we are doing, and we do not notice someone new. You might say:

Sometimes when we feel very comfortable someplace, we don't think about how a new person might feel coming into that same place for the first time. But, as Unitarian Universalists, we want to try to remember to welcome others whenever we have a chance to.

Now ask for stories of times the children were welcomed into a group or a situation. Ask what someone did or said to welcome them. Ask how they felt. Acknowledge that it makes us feel good when we are welcomed. You might say:

How does it feel when we welcome others? We feel friendly and loving, and that is a good way to feel.

ACTIVITY 3 ~ SONG - "COME, COME, WHOEVER YOU ARE"

Materials for Activity

- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- A copy of *Singing the Living Tradition*, the Unitarian Universalist hymnbook
- Optional: Computer with Internet access or a music player

Preparation for Activity

- Read the Description of Activity. Decide how much time you can give the unpacking of the song and assess how the dance component will work with this group of children, and plan accordingly.
- Write the words to "Come, Come, Whoever You Are," Hymn 188 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, on newsprint, and post.
- If you do not know "Come, Come, Whoever You Are," familiarize yourself with the tune. You can also listen to the song sung as a round by members of Bull Run (Virginia) Unitarian Universalists. Optional: Invite a skilled musical volunteer to help teach the song and/or help you incorporate movement into this activity. The *Tapestry of Faith* resource *Making Music Live*, by Nick Page, offers practical guidance to help you lead songs, with or without movement, in a Unitarian Universalist religious education setting.
- Optional: If you have time, plan to teach the children to sing "Come, Come, Whoever You Are" as a round. See Alternate Activity 2, *Leadership in Action - Leading a Round in Congregational Worship* if you wish to extend the children's engagement with this song.

Description of Activity

Participants learn "Come, Come, Whoever You Are," Hymn 188 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, and identify ways the lyrics express Unitarian Universalist values related to welcoming.

Ask:

When you entered the room today, what ritual did we exchange? [A greeting.]

Why do we greet people?

What are some ways we greet people? [Invite the children to demonstrate, by greeting each other and co-leaders.]

How do you feel when you enter a room and someone greets you? [Affirm that greeting people is one way to make them feel welcomed. When we welcome someone, they feel we want them to be with us, to be part of our group or community, to feel at home.]

Sometimes we greet someone when we first meet them, but maybe we can do more to make them feel welcomed.

After a greeting, what more can we do to welcome someone? [Prompt: What might you do or say to make a visitor feel comfortable at your home? What could you do to make a new child at school or in your neighborhood feel like they belong? How do we welcome people here at the congregation?]

Invite the group to sit comfortably. Sing "Come, Come, Whoever You Are," Hymn 188 in *Singing the Living Tradition* softly, one time through. Ask if any children know the song. Invite those who do to sing it with you a second time. Tell the group that the words in this song were written by Rumi, a Sufi mystic who lived hundreds of years ago. The tune is by a UU minister, Reverend Lynn Ungar. Say:

Think of this song as an invitation asking people to come into this space. Does it sound inviting to you?

Talk through the words of the song, using the newsprint you have posted:

Come, come, whoever, you are. Say:

These words tell us who is welcome when we sing this song. Who is welcome? [Affirm that everyone is welcome.]

Wanderer, worshipper... Say:

These words say more about who we are going to welcome. It could be someone just wandering by. It could be someone who wants to join us in worshipping together, like we do at our congregation, It could even be someone who might only want to visit one time, or stay just a little while and then leave That person is welcome, too.

Lover of leaving. Say:

This part can be confusing. What do you think the author of these words meant? If someone loves to "leave" then

is it important that they always have a place to return to? Is our congregation and faith that place? [Affirm "yes."]

Ours is no caravan of despair. Say:

Do you all know what a caravan is? A caravan is a procession of people, animals, or wagons or cars traveling together in a line. "Despair" is feeling sad or unsure of what to do. Our UU faith is not a caravan of despair, but a caravan of joy and love.

Come, yet again come. Say:

These words say we want people to come not just one time, but any time they want to join us. We will welcome them each time.

Tell the group that many UU groups like to sing this song together. Ask: Why do you think Unitarian Universalists like us think it is important to welcome people? Affirm that our first Principle says everyone has value and deserves to be treated with respect. When we act in a welcoming way to someone new, that is a sign that we respect that person, and we are living our first UU Principle.

Now lead the children to sing the song again, this time using their bodies to act out how the song welcomes others to feel like a part of our group. Say:

Let's sing the song again, as a real sign of welcoming. This time, let's use our bodies to show signs of welcoming, too.

Encourage children to use gestures that are signs of welcome, such as waving "hello" and using arms to motion someone closer.

ACTIVITY 4 ~ THE WELCOME CHALLENGE

Materials for Activity

- Chairs for all participants, plus one extra chair
- Optional: A welcome mat

Preparation for Activity

- Arrange chairs in a circle—one for each participant, plus one extra. If the group normally sits in a circle on the floor, plan how you will designate an "extra seat" on the floor.
- Take a careful look at your meeting space. Make sure it models accessibility; for example, are paths clear for a child who might use a wheelchair or crutches?
- Optional: Obtain a welcome mat, or make one by writing "Welcome!" on a sheet of newsprint.
- Optional: Visit the UUA website for information on making congregations more accessible. Prepare suggestions to share with the children.

Description of Activity

Gather children in a circle, leaving one empty chair. Ask, "Who is this chair for?" Take responses. Affirm that it could be for anyone who might wish to join our group.

Ask if anyone has attended a Passover Seder. Explain:

A Seder is a meal shared at the Jewish holiday of Passover. Often, families set an empty chair at the table for the prophet Elijah. A chair for Elijah means a chair for anyone, as Elijah is known to come in disguise—like the Hawaiian goddess of fire, Pele—to see if people will welcome him. Some groups set up an empty chair to represent people who are not yet part of the group, but may join them someday. The chair reminds the group to

be always welcoming.

Tell the children they will have a chance to imagine who might sit in our empty chair, and how they could welcome that person. Give an example: What if the person did not speak English? Could they make that person feel welcome? What signs would they use to welcome that person?

Now ask, "What if the person could not see very well?" Would they need to welcome them in a different way? How?

Tell them that the congregation spends a lot of time trying to make all the programs at the congregation welcoming and accessible. Ask if anyone can tell you what "accessible" means. Help children understand that accessibility is about making sure everybody can participate-children, youth, elders, people who have different abilities and maybe use a wheelchair or a hearing aid, people who speak different languages, people who have never been to a UU congregation before and might not know what we do here.

Variation

Place a welcome mat in the circle. Tell the group you will describe a child who might sit in the chair. Ask children to raise their hand as they think of a sign of welcome they might offer that child. As you call on a child, have them state their idea and ask the group what they think. When the group affirms the idea, invite that child to come to the welcome mat. Help children contribute so different participants generate a few ideas for welcoming each child you describe. It is okay to repeat ideas for welcoming different children-for example, "Greet them" fits any situation. You can also ask children to name things NOT to do-actions and words that would not be welcoming. Aim to have each participant come to the welcome mat at least once.

Use these examples, plus your own. You might invite children to describe different children, too:

- A non-English speaking child
 - A child who has just moved to the neighborhood
 - A child who is visually impaired
 - A child who has never been to a UU congregation before
 - A child who uses a wheelchair or crutches
 - A child who does not or cannot speak
 - A child who misses their parent
 - A child who you recognize because they are also new at your school
- To conclude, say, in your own words:

Some of the children we described are said to have "special needs," but sometimes we all have special needs: If I am in a new place and feeling scared or lonely, I need to be welcomed in a different way than if I am familiar with this place and all of you. We are welcoming when we do not make assumptions about what a person can do, likes to do, or what they need. If an activity called for cutting out shapes from paper, what would be the best thing to do to be welcoming to a child who does not see well: Cut it out for them, or ask if they need any help? [Take responses. Affirm that it is best to ask if help is needed and what that help might be, instead of assuming help is needed and/or doing something a person might not want us to do.]

Making our congregation accessible and knowing respectful ways to welcome different people here are two important ways to be welcoming. These are ways we can be UU every day.

INCLUDING ALL PARTICIPANTS

If the group includes a child with a disability or one who belongs to a minority or historically marginalized group, do not describe their attributes or limitations as part of the game or call the child out in any way during the activity.

ACTIVITY 5 ~ CREATING A RITUAL OF WELCOME

Materials for Activity

- Optional: Newsprint, markers, and tape

Description of Activity

Participants design a ritual for the Signs of Our Faith community.

Say:

Now that we have talked about some reasons and some ways to be welcoming, let's think of some ways we can welcome children who are new to our group. What are some simple things we can do here, when we meet together, to make a visitor or new member of the Signs of Our Faith community feel welcome? What actions are welcoming?

Encourage contributions and list ideas on newsprint. As needed, offer these suggestions:

Helping a new child create a name tag

Asking a new child what name or nickname they prefer to be called

Giving a new child directions to the bathroom and water fountain

Simply saying, "Welcome, [new person's name]!"

A round of group introductions, where children introduce themselves and share something personal, such as their favorite food or what they like to do in their leisure time

Once some ideas are listed, engage the group to shape one or more welcoming rituals and commit to using them when someone new comes to the group. If there is time, have one or more children role-play being new so others can practice the ritual.

After this session, write down the ritual. Make sure all co-leaders have these notes, so you will be able to remind participants to enact the ritual when a new person visits or joins the group.

CLOSING

Materials for Activity

- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Taking It Home
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Optional: Stoles, including extras for visitors
- Optional: Items needed for new Closing ritual (Session 9, Activity 4)

Preparation for Activity

- Download and adapt Taking It Home and copy for all participants. And/or, plan to email Taking It Home to parents/caregivers after this session.
- If the group designed a Closing ritual in Session 9, prepare to hold it. If not, use the Closing described here. Write the words for chalice extinguishing on newsprint, and post.

Description of Activity

Distribute stoles and invite participants to put them on.

Distribute Taking It Home. Tell participants that at the end of every session, they will receive this guide to fun activities they can do with family or friends. Read it aloud to give participants an idea of activities suggested.

Gather everyone in a circle around the chalice table. Lead the group to say:

We end as we began: together.

May we remember to be UU not just when we are together here, but every day and in every way.

Invite the group to pass a blessing around the circle. Say you will each, in turn, address the person next to you by name and say "Thank you for being here today." Model by addressing the person on your left: "Howard, thank you for being here today."

When everyone has blessed a person next to them, extinguish the chalice together.