

## SPIRIT IN PRACTICE



A Tapestry of Faith Program for Adults

# WORKSHOP 4

## Spiritual Partnerships

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### THIS WORKSHOP HAS X ACTIVITIES

#### INTRO

*Listening is a creative force. Something quite wonderful occurs when we are listened to fully. We expand, ideas come to life and grow, we remember who we are. Some speak of this force as a creative fountain within us that springs forth; others call it the inner spirit, intelligence, true self. Whatever this force is called, it shrivels up when we are not listened to and it thrives when we are.*

—Kay Lindahl

In the majority of the world's religious traditions, spiritual aspirants seek out a teacher, a guru, a master, a guide—someone who has already traversed the spiritual terrain and who can, because of his/her own experiences, help another make the journey. In the West, the most common term for such a person is "spiritual director."

Unitarian Universalists who are not familiar with the rich history of spiritual guides or directors, or who have negative associations with the term, may not be immediately drawn to the concept.

Yet a number of Unitarian Universalists are seeking spiritual directors, and a Unitarian Universalist Spiritual Directors' Network has come into being. This workshop helps dispel common misconceptions about spiritual direction and introduces participants to the role it can play in Unitarian Universalist spiritual growth.

As practiced today, spiritual direction is helps people listen to the inner voice, the inner wisdom, the "inner director" that we all have within us. Directors, then, are not spiritual geniuses who lead the unenlightened, but sensitive companions who know something of the journey and can helpfully guide others by pointing out some of the signs and markers, the flora and the fauna, that might otherwise go unseen or unexamined. The term "spiritual director" may then be misleading, because you direct yourself more than your spiritual director directs you. Other terms to describe this relationship include "spiritual companion" and "soul friend." These terms might be more useful in the context of this workshop, because the goal is to explore an emerging model of spiritual friendship, one that draws on the example of the peer counseling movement.

Peer counseling, which has been around since at least the mid-1960s, is most commonly found in high schools and colleges. Students trained primarily in listening skills offer counseling to their peers. Boundaries are clearly established, and giving advice is discouraged. Yet simply being deeply listened to by someone who knows what it's like to be at your stage of life can be extremely powerful. Decades of experience have proven one of the foundational premises of the peer counseling movement: a great many people have a great many problems that do not require the advanced training and expertise of mental health professionals.

There can be therapeutic benefits in nonprofessional relationships that are built with something approximating professional boundaries. The relationship is clearly defined, each person can have clear expectations of the other, and the relationship as a whole has a focus and an intent.

This workshop does not train participants to be spiritual friends. It does open participants to the possibility of finding a spiritual partnership to deepen their spiritual journeys. and provides an experience of spiritual reflection, sharing, and listening that approximates the kind of discussions they might have with spiritual friends.

An alternate activity in the workshop discusses what a spiritual peer program might look like in your congregation. It could be as simple and informal as one parishioner getting together with another on a regular basis to discuss the demands and discoveries of their spiritual lives. This could be an open, mutual conversation, or each person could take turns listening and talking.

If a more formal network were to be created, once or twice a year the congregation could offer a workshop/training on both the intent of spiritual friendship and the necessary skills of active listening, boundary setting, focusing questions, and the like. People interested in the program could sign up and either pair themselves with someone else or be paired by the minister or lay leader who oversees the program. Each pair would establish their own expectations of when to meet, for how long, and how often, and whether their relationship will be for a set period of time or open ended. Then, periodically throughout the year, the person who is overseeing the program would check in with each pair of friends to see how the program is going.

This is new territory, but very exciting and in keeping with our Unitarian Universalist emphasis on shared ministry. A midway point between personal spiritual practices and communal worship experiences, spiritual friendship can be a powerful way to help keep a person "on track" with his/her journey.

## **GOALS**

This workshop will:

- Present participants with the idea of deepening their spiritual practice by working with a "spiritual friend"
- Engage participants in reflecting on their own experiences of the sacred and their current spiritual needs
- Build community among participants with meaningful sharing and listening experiences

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Participants will:

- Write and speak about their experiences of the sacred
- Articulate some of their current spiritual needs
- Actively listen to other participants, offering reflections and insight in response

## WORKSHOP-AT-A-GLANCE

Activity	Minutes
Welcoming and Entering	0
Opening	5
Activity 1: Sharing Names	5
Activity 2: The Story of the Shape of the Spirit	10
Activity 3: Reflecting with a Partner	35
Closing	5
Alternate Activity 1: Considering a Spiritual Peer Program	30
Alternate Activity 2: Deeper Sharing and Reflection	30

# ACTIVITY 1

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## THE STORY OF THE SHAPE OF THE SPIRIT (10 MINUTES)



### MATERIALS FOR ACTIVITY

- Copies of Story 1: [The Shape of the Spirit](#) (included in this document) (one copy for leader, plus several copies for participants who may wish to read along)



### PREPARATION FOR ACTIVITY

- Review the story in advance so that you can present it effectively.

## DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY

Read the story "The Shape of the Spirit" aloud. Provide copies of the story to people who prefer to read along.

After sharing the story, invite participants to take a moment to quietly center themselves, to let go of any tension or emotions that are not needed for the next hour, and to breathe deeply. You may ring a bell at the beginning and end of this silent time, or simply invite people into the silence and then gently bring them out.

After the silence, invite participants to discuss their responses to the story. Keep the discussion brief and focused, allowing time for your own concluding remarks.

Ask:

- **Does this story sound familiar to you? Why or why not?**
- **Is spiritual partnership something you see many examples of?**

- **How do you think society would be different if people paid as much attention to being spiritually healthy as they do to being physically healthy?**
- **How do you think having a "spiritual buddy" or spiritual friend would affect your own spiritual practices?**

Conclude by emphasizing the value of spiritual friends. You may wish to draw on the text from this workshop's Introduction to make your points.



## THE SHAPE OF THE SPIRIT

After many years of being out of shape, he decided it was time to do something about the state of his body. With great excitement and enthusiasm, he went to the local gym, got a membership, and began a circuit-training routine. He felt good. And he kept at it, going to the gym several times a week.

For the first couple of months. And then a business trip intervened. And then he had to work late. And then it was one of his kids' birthday. And soon he was hardly going at all. Then he could barely remember the last time he'd gone.

So he went back to the gym and asked the trainer for a suggestion. "Have you tried finding a workout buddy?" she asked. He hadn't. But the idea made sense, so he talked to a couple of his friends who went to the same gym and found one who agreed to "buddy up."

The two went to the gym together sometimes, but often they continued working out alone. But they checked in with each other. They talked about the difficulties they were having staying motivated; they celebrated each others' achievements. They gave each other ideas to "spice things up." They commiserated over aches and pains. And soon he could hardly imagine *not* working out. His "buddy" helped keep him moving.

After a few years of being back in shape, he decided it was time to do something about the state of his spirit. With great excitement and enthusiasm, he went to his local Unitarian Universalist congregation, became a member, and began taking part in small group ministries and adult education opportunities. And he felt good.

For the first couple of years. But then the freedom and diversity of the congregation weren't new to him anymore, and the Principles and Sources that had once excited him were now taken for granted. He felt he'd reached a bit of a plateau on his spiritual path and that he needed some new energy and direction. So he went to the minister and presented his dilemma to her. In the conversation, he happened to mention that he worked out regularly and had a workout buddy.

"Workout buddy," the minister said. "What a nice idea. Have you ever thought of finding a 'spiritual buddy'—one who can be a companion and support to you in your spiritual practices? Someone who can challenge you, support you, and help you stay focused like your workout buddy does?"

"A spiritual buddy!" he said. "Just what I need!" That night he called up his friend, the fellow who had introduced him to Unitarian Universalism. And they became spiritual buddies. They met for coffee a couple times per month to discuss their spiritual practices and their theological ideas. Sometimes they meditated together. Once, on the solstice, they hiked up a hill to see the sun rise. Another time they both read the same book about evolution and spirituality. Their friendship grew deeper, and their spiritual lives flourished. He participated in his Unitarian Universalist congregation with renewed excitement, knowing he was on a rich spiritual path and delighting in the company of fellow travelers.

## ACTIVITY 2

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### REFLECTING WITH A PARTNER (35 MINUTES)



#### MATERIALS FOR ACTIVITY

- Questions listed on newsprint or a digital slide (see Preparation)
- Writing paper (at least one sheet per participant)
- Pens or pencils (at least one per participant)
- Clock, watch, or timer
- Bell
- Optional: Computer and digital projector



#### PREPARATION FOR ACTIVITY

List the following questions on newsprint or a digital slide:

- **How and when do I experience the sacred?**
- **What mindsets and practices help me experience the sacred?**
- **What else would help me at this point in my spiritual development?**

#### DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY

Explain that most of this workshop will be spent working with one another as "spiritual friends," peers who can help each other along the way.

Display the newsprint or digital slide with the three questions for reflection:

- How and when do I experience the sacred?

- What mindsets and practices help me experience the sacred?
- What else would help me at this point in my spiritual development?

Invite participants to take five minutes to reflect on and write their responses to these questions. They can write in their journals or on paper you have provided. Explain that they will have the opportunity to share their responses with a partner later on in the activity.

After five minutes, ring the bell to draw participants' attention back to the leaders. Divide the group into pairs. (You can have participants form their own pairs, but using a random method to assign the pairings can yield some surprising synchronicities.) If you have an odd number of participants, then one of the leaders can partner with a participant.

Explain that each partner will get to be a "spiritual friend" to the other. Emphasize that the "friend" is primarily there to listen deeply to the other person and to respond as a helpful peer. Giving advice and deep analysis are not the goal. Rather, this activity is about "listening someone into their truth." This doesn't mean that the friend can't make any comments at all, but she/he should focus his/her energy on listening and should speak only those things which must be said.

Each person will have up to five minutes to share his/her responses to the three questions while the spiritual partner listens. The spiritual partner will then have up to three minutes to ask clarifying questions, share helpful ideas, and discuss the sharer's experiences further.

Remind the group of the workshop's ground rules, emphasizing respect and that the goal of this sharing is conversation, not conversion.

Ring the bell at five and eight minutes to signify when it is time for partners to move to the next phase of the exercise.

Invite partners to trade roles and repeat the exercise.

When the sharing has concluded, ring the bell and bring the group back together to discuss the experience. Affirm that this activity might have felt more or less comfortable to various participants, as some of us are introverts, some are

extraverts, some have had conversations like this before, and some are just learning how to talk about their spiritual lives. Ask:

- Have any of you ever done something like this before? In what context? Would you recommend that context to others for their spiritual growth?
- What are some of the benefits of having regular check-ins with peers about our spiritual growth?
- Could you see yourself engaging in this kind of dialogue with someone regularly?
- What would hinder you in having this kind of dialogue? What would help you?

Conclude by sharing your perspectives on the value of spiritual friends. Thank participants for their reflections and sharing, especially those who ventured outside of their comfort zones to complete the exercise.

## FIND OUT MORE

[Unitarian Universalist Spiritual Directors' Network](http://www.uusdn.org/) (at [www.uusdn.org/](http://www.uusdn.org/))—A loose association of Unitarian Universalist clergy and laity who provide spiritual direction to others.

[Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation](http://www.shalem.org/) (at [www.shalem.org/](http://www.shalem.org/))—One of the leading trainers of ecumenical spiritual directors, the Shalem Institute maintains a geographical list of directors to aid the search for one.

Addison, Howard. *Show Me Your Way: The Complete Guide to Exploring Interfaith Spiritual Direction*. Skylight Paths Publishing, 2000. Rabbi Addison, who received spiritual direction from Catholic sisters and who studied with the ecumenical Shalem Institute, provides one of the few books on spiritual direction that truly comes from an interfaith perspective.

Lindahl, Kay. *The Sacred Art of Listening: Forty Reflections for Cultivating a Spiritual Practice*. Skylight Paths Publishing, 2002. Emphasizes the "three essential qualities of deep listening": silence, reflection, and presence. Also offers instruction in sharing heartfelt emotions with clarity and compassion.

Wheatley, Margaret J. *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002. This wonderful book explores the power of simple conversation. The first half reminds us why this is so important; the second offers ten "conversation starters."