



The Path

Introduction from Soul Matters

A Soul Matters facilitator once shared, “I guess after plan A fails, I need to remember there’s still a whole alphabet out there.”

It’s not just our friend who needs help remembering that there’s a whole alphabet out there; it’s all of us. We all get stuck in wanting things a certain way. We all, at times, focus so intently on the few things going wrong that we completely miss the dozens of things going right. Tunnel vision too often takes over our days.

For Unitarian Universalists, this is the central tragedy of the human condition. We respect those who frame the human problem as sin or twisted wills, but it’s nearsightedness that our religion is most worried about. Which is also why blessings are so central to our faith. They are, for us, a way of widening our view.

Unlike some of our brother and sister religions, we don’t *say* a lot of blessings. Instead we *point* to them. For us, blessings are not something we give to each other as much as they involve us helping each other notice all that’s *already been given* to us. And it’s not just about widening our view to see the gifts themselves; it’s about widening our understanding of life. Pointing to blessings repairs our relationship with life, allowing us to see it as generous, not threatening, and full of grace-filled surprises, not dominated by a cold indifference.

And there’s a lot at stake when it comes to this wider view. When the world seems stingy to us, we are stingy to others. Those who feel blessed have little trouble passing blessings on. Our tradition takes this calculus seriously. As UU minister Rev. Don Wheat, puts it, “The religious person is a grateful person, and the grateful person is the generous person.” In short, by noticing our blessings, we become a blessing.

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What Does It Mean to Be a People of Blessing?



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So this month the question in front of all of us is not simply “Do you notice the blessings surrounding you?” It’s also “How are the blessings in your life leading you to bless others?” That “whole alphabet” out there doesn’t just happen on its own; we add to it. Blessings don’t just fill us up; they cause us to overflow. Life spills into us and we spill into others. In other words, blessings don’t just enrich us; they connect us. And maybe that is the greatest blessing of all.

2017/2018 Themes

September – Welcome
October – Courage
November – Abundance
December – Hope
January – Intention
February – Perseverance
March – Balance
April – Emergence
May – Creativity
June – Blessing

Self-Care for the Spiritual Journey

When we go deeper into spiritual exploration together and individually, there’s always a chance we will encounter some tender spots in our own spirits and stories. Therefore, it is important, when doing deep spiritual work, to have trusted companions and adequate support on the journey, and to know you are welcome to care for yourself and your spirit along the way, engaging in the theme to the level that’s comfortable for you.



Likewise, please know that we are here to offer support if you find yourself struggling with something surfaced by the monthly theme. Rev. Mara is our first point of contact for pastoral care. She may be able to set up a time to meet you, or refer you to caring lay leaders through our Care Network, or outside resources. She can be reached at revmara@uusociety.org or (802) 862-5630 ext. 24.

Option A: Secret Blessings

Wayne Muller, in his book *Sabbath*, encourages a practice he calls “secret blessing.” He writes, “Bless strangers quietly, secretly. Offer it to people you notice on the street, in the market, on the bus. [Silently say to yourself] ‘May you be happy. May you be at peace.’ Feel the blessing move through your body as you offer it. Notice how you both receive some benefit from the blessing.”

At first blush it’s hard to imagine how a secret blessing can produce much good. How can a person receive something they aren’t aware you’re giving them? But, of course, this practice is more about what happens to us than what happens to them. It alters our attention, making us scan and become more aware of our surroundings. It changes our attitude toward others. Just imagine going through your day looking for excuses to wish people well or think the best of them rather than looking for threats and assuming ill intent. And it connects us to others, helping us acknowledge common struggles and hungers.

But how exactly might it change you? That is what this exercise is all about.

Do it for a day or maybe two. Be disciplined about it and set a target for yourself like “I will secretly offer 10 blessings to 10 different people throughout the day.” Don’t be afraid to keep it simple. A blessing is as straightforward as completing the sentence: “I wish _____ for you.”

At the end of the day, meditate on or write about how offering those blessings and seeking out people to bless altered your day. How did blessing others bless you? Come to your group ready to share a few stories about who you blessed, how and why.

Option B: A Blessing List

One of the most famous Blessing Lists comes from *The Sound of Music* and the song “[My Favorite Things](#).” The point of the song is that ordinary blessings save us. “We don’t feel so sad,” the song says. We also don’t feel so isolated, anxious or disconnected from life. As we notice the ordinary blessings around us, we experience life as a generous friend, not a threatening foe. Or to use theological language, ordinary blessings communicate to us that in some mysterious way we are the beloved of the spirit at the heart of life. When we focus on our favorite things, it can feel like these blessings were created just for us.

So take a week and connect to your belovedness by making a list of “your favorite things.” Add at least 2-3 each day. And yes, make it a literal list. To make it easy on you, we’ve put together a Blessing List form for you to download and print out: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fPKcGMWmERek9WK7BeZ-97gnxVCbt0OXo2OE5yFIVCg/edit?usp=sharing>

Put the list in a place where you will see it each day: by your bed, on your desk, on the fridge. It’s important to watch it fill up so you can more easily see connections and themes. Don’t worry about being profound. Think of the *Sound of Music* song: It was full of simple things. Similarly, the point of this exercise is to identify YOUR favorite simple things.

Come to your group ready to share the list, if you are comfortable. Also be ready to share how noticing these blessings blessed you.

Spiritual Exercises

Option C: Bless Yourself

In its simplest form, a blessing is a wish that some form of strength or goodness comes into the life of another. As Rabbi Lawrence Kushner puts it, “Offering a blessing is like a coach whispering to an athlete before a competition, “You can do it!” More than encouragement, the words of blessing literally bring forth and make real an otherwise unrealizable force.”

How that force is brought forth can be debated, but at least it’s clear that focusing one’s attention on something makes it more likely it will manifest in our lives.

So why not do some manifesting of your own? Why not bless yourself? Start by asking, “What do I wish for in my life right now?” More courage? Patience? Awareness of beauty? Whatever it is, make it your blessing for yourself this month. Think of it as saying to yourself, “May _____ be mine as I journey through this month.”

Once you’ve figured out your self-blessing, add a concrete dimension to the exercise by finding an object that symbolizes your blessing and put it in a place where you will see it every day. For instance if you wish for patience to bless you this month, find an old wrist watch and set it on the table next to your bed. If it’s the courage to forgive others, maybe find a rock that symbolizes the grudge you’re holding. If it’s memory you hope to be blessed by, find a picture of the loved one you want to hold tighter to, and make room for it on your desk. Let your chosen physical object incarnate your blessing. Let it, in a sense, bless you every time you look at it.

Come to your group with your object, if you are comfortable. Also be ready to share how blessing yourself this way made Kushner’s “otherwise unrealizable force” emerge.

Option D: Write a Blessing

Former priest and poet John O’Donohue was a master at writing blessings for everyday challenges and transitions. In his beloved book, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*, he wrote blessings for everything from retirement and divorce to buying a new home or finding a new job. He also wrote blessings for people, from new parents and business leaders to farmers and nurses. He saw blessings as companions for our journeys. A way of making one’s path more clear and reminding one that others have walked these ways before.

So what journey are you in the midst of right now? Or what journey is someone you care about in the midst of? This exercise invites you to offer yourself or another person a companion for that journey by trying your hand at writing a blessing.

O’Donohue’s book is easily available at libraries or online. We encourage you to get it and use it to support you on your way.

Come to your group ready to share the blessing you wrote, if you are comfortable. Also share the story of why you picked the topic you did and if you gave it to another person to bless them on their way.

Option E: Bless the Teachers

It’s the end of the school year. For some of us, teachers have offered us a huge blessing by guiding and caring for our children. And yet, teachers rarely get thanked for the blessings they give. So bless these teachers back. Work with your kids to find your own way of saying thanks. It might be a letter or a more tangible symbolic gift. Whatever it is, make sure it conveys the many ways they have left a mark and offered a blessing that matters more than they know. Here’s a video to inspire and motivate you:

What Teachers Make - *Taylor Mali*

<https://wordsfortheyear.com/2015/02/19/what-teachers-make-by-taylor-mali/>

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the single question that speaks to you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal is to figure out what being a part of a people of blessing means for you and your daily living. So, which question is calling to you? Which one contains "your work"?

1. Is it time to embrace yourself as a blessing once again? We all forget sometimes. We all let others' definitions of worth determine how we feel about our own. The work of seeing ourselves as a blessing is ongoing. How do you need to reclaim or rename your blessing to the world?
2. What is your favorite thing to do? When was the last time you did it? Why aren't you doing it all the time? Or at least much more often?
3. Some say a blessing is anything that helps us remember who we really are. We most often lose ourselves in work or relationships that ask us to be something we're not. Is it time to bless yourself and find yourself by saying goodbye to a job or a relationship that doesn't bless and see you?
4. Has age helped or hurt? At what age were you best at noticing the blessings around you? Have you gotten better as time has gone on? Or worse? What would improve your gaze?
5. Did your words bless or curse others this past week? A Soul Matters facilitator writes, "My mom often told us to consider our words before offering an opinion. Her mantra was: 'Are your words kind and helpful? If both adjectives do not apply, keep the thought to yourself!'" What words have fallen from your lips lately that you need to go back and turn into a blessing?
6. Is it time to bless yourself by believing you can do what others say can't be done?
7. Have you thanked all of your "fathers" for their blessings? Many of us have more than one father figure in our lives. When was the last time you told them thanks for their gifts? And let them know you carry them and their influence with you still?
8. In the midst of all the praises for ordinary blessings, is a tiny voice inside you whispering "more!?" Maybe it's okay to ignore a few everyday blessings for a while so you can make that "big blessing" real.
9. Sometimes there *aren't* blessings hidden in our pain. Sometimes it's *not* you overlooking the blessings; they simply *aren't* there. Often we just need space to acknowledge the emptiness, rather than have people try to minimize it, make it go away or convince us that we should find a silver lining. Is that the blessing you really need? The blessing of space to do nothing but mourn the loss and feel the pain? What will it take for you to get it?
10. Some blessings are always there; others are fleeting and eventually leave us. Which of your current blessings' time clock is farther along than you wish? What blessing needs to be noticed before it says goodbye?
11. Are you more often anxious about scarcity than you are stunned by all the undeserved blessings?
12. What was your biggest "unexpected blessing moment"? When did a blessing surprise and sustain you in the midst of pain? What gift or lesson from that story do you most need to remember today?
13. What if you told yourself that this was the best and most blessed part of your life? What might look or feel different to you?

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 hear it.

Word Roots

Blessing has a long history of meanings and roots. The Old English *blēdsian* based on *blōd*, “blood,” (originally “to mark or consecrate with blood”) was used to translate the Latin *benedicere* “to praise or worship.” The meaning shifted in late Old English toward “pronounce or make happy, prosperous, or fortunate.” In the Semitic language of Aramaic, the phrase translated as “blessed” in the Beatitudes was actually *tubwayhun* which refers to being ripe, mature; having reached a stage of the fullness of the person I am meant to be.

Wise Words

“So what, then, does it mean to offer a blessing, to be a blessing? To bless something or someone is to invoke its wholeness, to help remind the person or thing you are blessing of its essence, its sacredness, its beauty, and to help remind yourself of that, too. Blessing does not fix anything. It is not a cure... It does not instill health or well-being or strength. Instead, it reminds us that those things are already there, within us.” - [Rev. Elea Kemler](#)

“There is a reality in blessing... It doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it.”

- *Marilynne Robinson, from Gilead*

“To bless is to put a bit of yourself into something.”

- *Macrina Wiederkehr and Joyce Rupp*

“To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer. It is more than a word of praise or appreciation; it is more than pointing out someone’s talents or good deeds; it is more than putting someone in the light. To give a blessing is to affirm, to say ‘yes’ to a person’s Belovedness.” - *Henri J. M. Nouwen*

“A blessing is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth and strengthen what is whole in one another. By making a place for wholeness within our relationships, we offer others the opportunity to be whole without shame and become a place of

refuge from everything in them and around them that is not genuine. We enable people to remember who they are.” - *Rachel Naomi Remen, My Grandfather’s Blessings*

“The one who offers a blessing is like a coach whispering to an athlete before a competition, ‘You can do it!’ More than encouragement, positive spin, or sincere wish, the words of blessing literally bring forth and make real an otherwise unrealizable force. In this way, blessing is not supplication but symbiosis. God needs us to summon blessings, just as we could not live without them.”

- *Lawrence Kushner*

“Where does it come from, this strange unquenchable human urge for ‘more’ that is both our blessing and our curse? It has caused us to lift our eyes to the heavens and thread together pieces of the universe until we can glimpse a shadow of the divine creation. Yet to gain this knowledge, we have sometimes lost the mystery of a cloud, the beauty of a garden, the joy of a single step. We must learn to value the small as well as the great... Do we really need much more than this? To honor the dawn. To visit a garden. To talk to a friend. To contemplate a cloud. To cherish a meal. To bow our heads before the mystery of the day. Are these not enough?” - [Kent Neburn](#)

“We bless the life around us far more than we realize... the unexpected phone call, the brief touch, the willingness to listen generously, the warm smile or wink of recognition. Big messages come in small packages. All it may take to restore someone’s trust in life may be returning a lost earring or a dropped glove. A woman once told me that she did not feel the need to reach out to those around her because she prayed every day... But a prayer is about our relationship to God; a blessing is about our relationship to the spark of God in one another. God may not need our attention as badly as the person next to us on the bus or behind us on line in the supermarket.”

- *Rachel Naomi Remen, My Grandfather’s Blessings*

“It’s hardest to love the ordinary things, she said, but you get lots of opportunities to practice.”

- *Brian Andreas*

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Resources

“Something Wild and Unbroken” by *Carrie Newcomer*

Full poem here: <http://carienewcomer.tumblr.com/post/122883509259/something-wild-and-unbroken>

“Riding my bike down a narrow country road...

A graceful young doe

Was bounding in beautiful unhurried leaps...

Then with a burst of speed

She dashed in front of me

And disappeared into the woods

Leaving me breathless

With a feeling of visitation...

Since that moment,

The world has felt less weary...”

It could happen any time, tornado,
earthquake, Armageddon. It could happen.

Or sunshine, love, salvation.

It could, you know. That’s why we wake

and look out — no guarantees

in this life.

But some bonuses, like morning,

like right now, like noon,

like evening.

Yes!

-*William Stafford*

“Blessed be the longing that brought you here

And quickens your soul with wonder.

May you have the courage to listen to the voice of desire

that disturbs you when you have settled for something

safe.” - *John O’Donohue*

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless us with discomfort

At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships

So that we may live from deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger

At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God’s crea-
tions

So that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears

To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and
war,

So that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and

To turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with just enough foolishness
To believe that we can make a difference in the world,
So that we can do what others claim cannot be done:
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and all our
neighbors who are poor.

“Thank you, faithful things!” by *Mark Strand*

Thank you, faithful things!

Thank you, world!

To know that the city is still there,

that the woods are still there,

and the houses, and the hum of traffic

and the slow cows grazing in the field;

that the earth continues to turn

and time hasn’t stopped,

that we come back whole

to suck the sweet marrow of day,

thank you, bright morning,

thank you, thank you!

Videos

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones

Richard Dawkins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOXMjCnKwb4>

The Best Gift I Ever Survived

[https://www.ted.com/talks/](https://www.ted.com/talks/stacey_kramer_the_best_gift_i_ever_survived#t-163255)

[stacey_kramer_the_best_gift_i_ever_survived#t-163255](https://www.ted.com/talks/stacey_kramer_the_best_gift_i_ever_survived#t-163255)

Stacey Kramer offers a moving, personal, three-minute

parable that shows how an unwanted experience --

frightening, traumatic, costly -- can turn out to also be a

priceless blessing.

Responding to the Blessing of Life’s Beauty

TED talk and video meditation

[https://www.ted.com/talks/](https://www.ted.com/talks/louie_schwartzberg_nature_beauty_gratitude)

[louie_schwartzberg_nature_beauty_gratitude](https://www.ted.com/talks/louie_schwartzberg_nature_beauty_gratitude)

Nature’s beauty can be fleeting -- but not through Louie

Schwartzberg’s lens. He shares his stunning time-lapse

photography and invites us into a video meditation on be-

ing grateful for every day.

Blessed by the Moon

<https://vimeo.com/259818647>

Resources

The Paradox - Sarah Kay

On the blessing of being where you're supposed to be.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VShVwQtIFF8>

Blessed Are Those Who Work for Revolutionary Love

Rev. David Miller

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=27&v=9u3nwyu_vHw

THE LGBTQ Alphabet

<https://www.facebook.com/Equinox/videos/10154862193754401/>

In honor of Pride Month this video celebrates the blessings of 26 ways to share who you are and how you love.

Articles

Pronounce a Silent Blessing by Barbara Brown Taylor

<http://www.dailygood.org/story/1283/pronounce-a-silent-blessing-barbara-brown-taylor/>

Books

The Gentle Art of Blessing: A Simple Practice That Will Transform You and Your World

by Pierre Pradervand

https://www.amazon.com/Gentle-Art-Blessing-Practice-Transform-ebook/dp/B002TNGBJU/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1521469988&sr=1_1&keywords=9781439153635

On Gratitude: 51 Micro-Essays on Life's Blessings

https://www.amazon.com/dp/1440505942/ref=as_at_imprTo-ken=uVtj.s3MHDceGhhf3ADfyQ&slotNum=2&tag=brainpick-20&camp=213381&creative=390973&linkCode=w61&creativeASIN=1440505942&adid=1EFV6YMKWWGYFCG3EC5G&https://www.brainpickings.org/2010/10/25/on-gratitude/

Blessing: The Art and the Practice by David Spangler

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/view/2813>
https://www.amazon.com/dp/B005KGJWN0/ref=dp_kindle-redirect?encoding=UTF8&btkr=1

LGBTQ Books That Blessed

https://www.buzzfeed.com/farrahpenn/the-most-influential-lgbt-books?utm_term=.woAJJ1N5e#.uoimmQGDP

Music

Grateful: A Love Song to the World

Empty Hands Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO2o98Zpzg8>

To This Life - Kim Churchill

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glO6eQu9OA0>

Wonder - Naughty Boy

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kASjW_aPbQ

My Favorite Things from *The Sound of Music*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IagRZBvLtw&feature=youtu.be>

Thank You Very Much - Leah Song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKFed9LCong&index=19&list=RDm3rLLALWYyk>

Thank You - Alanis Morissette

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDp6F_Baf5I

May I Suggest

Susan Werner: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eW1DDSQnEYo&feature=youtu.be>

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Cover by Elenyi and Sarah Young:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Z3pjXmNq2g&index=1&list=PLyvBLXLjvLeyj3wsVboWHgtFaev-LQfRQ>

Slow Down - Nichole Nordeman

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clcnB_EUao8&index=6&list=RDIaOExJJJa_YA

Soul Matters Spotify Playlists

Check out these and other songs on our monthly theme by following the Soul Matters Blessing playlist on Spotify.

Here's a link to the playlists for all the monthly themes:

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/spotify-lists.html>