



Touchstones Project

Small Group Discussion Guide

Pluralism

Preparation: (Read the *Journal*)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: “In the world that lies ahead, ...pluralism is going to penetrate all cultures. How we live together with different points of view is going to become more ...important. I don’t know whether we can make progress in such a project without a contemplative practice that alerts us to our own biases, prejudices, and self-centered programs for happiness [that] ...trample on other people’s rights....” *Thomas Keating*

Chalice Lighting (James Vila Blake), adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the following wisdom story.

Different, Same, Different

Diya lived in a small town with her parents and grandparents. She was eight years old and loved to explore. Diya’s grandparents were from

India, and sometimes Diya found it hard to fit in. Diya was playing in the park one day when she saw a new girl. Both girls had long, jet-black hair, but the new girl had braids. Diya said, “Hi. I’m Diya.” The girl smiled and replied, “Ayita. Nice to meet you.” Ayita had just moved to town from a nearby reservation where her grandparents still lived. Diya had so many questions for her because their backgrounds were so different. Sometimes, they misunderstood each other, yet they each had much to teach and learn.

Diya invited Ayita over for dinner one day. Diya’s mother had made delicious Indian food. There were potato-filled dough pockets called Samosas, Dal Soup made from lentils, and chicken in a curry sauce. Ayita thought the food was spicy, but she still enjoyed it. Before dinner, Diya showed Ayita how to make a beautiful mandala on the driveway in front of her house using colored chalk.

Ayita, in return, invited Diya to have an overnight at her grandparent’s home on the reservation. Diya’s grandmother made a wonderful dinner using the *Three Sisters*. Diya loved the food, especially the fry bread. It reminded her of Naan, a bread her grandmother made.

Diya’s grandmother brought out materials the next morning so the girls could make dreamcatchers. Later, her grandmother had the girls help weed the garden, especially around the *Three Sisters*, where corn stalks were the trellis for the bean plants and big squash plants curled around them on the ground.

The girls learned a lot from each other about their different backgrounds and families. They realized they were both struggling to fit in at school because they were different from the other kids in their class. Sometimes, that made

them sad, but as they came to understand, respect, and support each other, the opinions of the others mattered less and less.

Their differences were no longer barriers but gifts that they shared. Diya and Ayita's friendship grew stronger each day. They learned that you can always find common ground no matter where you come from. They showed that diversity is a fact, inclusion is valuable, and love and friendship can overcome obstacles.

Diya and Ayita taught each other valuable lessons about acceptance and kindness. They showed the children in their class at school that different backgrounds and cultures can come together to create something beautiful and meaningful.

They thought it was funny that other kids called them both Indian. Same. But their heritages were so unique. Different. Yet their friendship also helped them learn all of the ways that they were similar. Same. That was when they decided to start a club called Same, Different, Same. Slowly, other kids with open hearts and minds became their friends and joined the club.

Diya, Ayita, and their new friends, because they cherished their differences and similarities, became ambassadors of kindness, spreading love and understanding everywhere they went in their small town.

Source: [Touchstones](#)

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

“Pluralism isn’t just diversity; it’s something we create out of this diversity.” Diana L. Eck

“Respect, I think, always implies imagination—the ability to see one another, across our inevitable differences, as living souls.”
Wendell Berry

“Pluralism matters because life is not worth living without new experiences—new people, new places, new challenges.” Tim Harford

“I like the pluralism of modernity; it doesn’t threaten me or my faith. And if one’s faith is dependent on being reinforced in every aspect of other people’s lives, then it is a rather insecure faith, don’t you think?” Andrew Sullivan

“There should be pluralism—the concept of many religions, many truths. But we must also be careful not to become nihilistic.” Dalai Lama

“To see the other side, to defend another people, not despite your tradition but because of it, is the heart of pluralism.” Eboo Patel

“Will we ever reach a cultural consensus that will stabilize the shifting sands of pluralism?” R.C. Sproul

“Religion is important for humanity, but it should evolve.... The first priority is to establish and develop the principle of pluralism in all religious traditions.” Dalai Lama

“It is not a Buddhist approach to say that if everyone practiced Buddhism, the world would be a better place. Wars and oppression begin from this kind of thinking.” Sulak Sivaraksa

“I thought about the meaning of pluralism in a world where the forces that seek to divide us are strong. I came to one conclusion: We have to save each other. It’s the only way to save ourselves.” Eboo Patel

“Pluralism accepts the moral reality of different kinds of truth, but rejects the idea that they can all be placed on a single scale, measured by a single value.” Timothy Snyder

“In badly fractured societies that have lost their appreciation of diversity and their regard for pluralism, opponents will be seen as enemies, politics will become replete with marital metaphors and anyone who thinks and speaks differently will be labeled as a ‘traitor.’” Elif Shafak

“Many religious moderates have taken the apparent high road of pluralism, asserting the equal validity of all faiths, but ...they neglect to notice the irredeemably sectarian truth claims of each.” Sam Harris

“Tolerance is the price we pay for living in a free, pluralistic society.” Robert Casey

“Minorities are always better off in a culture which protects dissent than in a culture which protects us from dissent.” Jonathan Rauch

“To respect the opinions of those who stand against you is nothing short of courageous.” Raif Badawi

“That Native American cultures are imperiled is important... When we lose cultures, we lose American plurality—the productive and lovely discomfort that true difference brings.” David Treuer

“Pluralism is no longer simply an asset or a prerequisite for progress and development; it is vital to our existence.” Aga Khan IV

“The desire to control everything is giving way to pluralism, uniformity to diversity, centralization to localism, opacity to transparency, and ...resistance to change to experimentation.” John Micklethwait

“Our societies have experienced the magic that occurs when pluralism flourishes and the marginalized assume their proper powers. But loss stalks those victories, as millions revolt against change and supremacies resurface.” Anand Giridharadas

“Humility is my table, respect is my garment, empathy is my food and curiosity is my drink.” Tariq Ramadan

“In the world that lies ahead, religious pluralism is going to penetrate all cultures. ...I don’t know whether we can make progress ...without a contemplative practice that alerts us to our own

biases, prejudices, and self-centered programs for happiness, especially when they trample on other people....” Thomas Keating

“Extremist movements are driven by their inability to tolerate ...pluralism. They refuse to accept the natural cultural and religious diversity of our world, seeking to impose their own beliefs ...as a universal pattern for humanity.” Deeyah Khan

“What distinguishes the ‘war on terror’ is that it is a war against a concept, not a nation. And the enemy concept, it seems to me, is pluralism.” Mohsin Hamid

Light and Dark: each was unaware that the other existed.” Ashim Shanker

“In the culture of pluralism... the only thing that cannot be tolerated is a claim to exclusivity.” R. C. Sproul

“...I hope we are moving toward a time when we don’t just ‘tolerate’ people from different cultures and religions, but ...appreciate ...the ways we are all different, and ...all the same.” Anne Shelby

“Pluralism and tolerance are pillars of modern society.” Bassam Tibi

“Another way to describe the dilemma for religious faith is that pluralism creates social conditions in which God is no longer an inevitability.” James Davison Hunter

“It is an enduring confidence that things can turn out well, if people are ready to practice a politics of compromise and pursue an ethic of pluralism.” Thomas L. Friedman

“If pluralism and academic freedom are to be used to defend liberal speakers and ideas, they ought to be equally valid for conservative views.” Bob Beckel

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl*

to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: “A society in which pluralism is not undergirded by ...shared values and held together by some ...mutual trust simply cannot survive. Pluralism that reflects no commitments ...to the common good is pluralism gone berserk....” *John W. Gardner*

Living the Questions

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. What are the benefits of diversity and multiculturalism? The challenges? Why do some people oppose both?
2. What are the pros and cons of tolerance in addressing diversity?
3. How can societies address conflicts arising from diverse perspectives?
4. Why is dialogue important? What challenge does it pose?
5. How do you regard exclusivism, the idea that one religion is true and all others are false? How can you dialogue with people with this view?
6. Is inclusivism, the belief that there is one superior religion, but other faiths have potential value, better than exclusivism? Why or why not?
7. Do you feel that you are sufficiently grounded in Unitarian Universalism so that you could participate in an interfaith dialogue? If yes, what helped you gain this grounding? If not, what can your congregation do to help?
8. Can a commitment to pluralism and dialogue make it possible to engage those who disagree with you politically? Why or why not?
9. How can we be aware of our hidden assumptions, biases, and prejudices?
10. How are exclusivism and inclusivism expressed in the political arena? What challenges do each present? How can meaningful engagement occur?
11. Have you developed a meaningful relationship with someone quite different from you, religiously, politically, etc.? How did that happen?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person for the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice (Elizabeth Selle Jones)
We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Closing Words

Rev. Philip R. Giles

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*