



Daily Practices
Holidays
Life Milestones

FAMILY FAITH PRACTICES

A RESOURCE FOR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS

Rev. Beth Dana, Editor

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introduction

On Sunday mornings we witness the vibrant spirit of Unitarian Universalism alive within our church walls. We gather, people of all ages and from many backgrounds, in our congregations for worship, learning, and community. We share our lives with one another. We pray and reflect. We sing and listen to beautiful music. We are inspired by what is preached, taught, and discussed. We engage in rituals that mark important milestones or passages in the life of individuals and the congregation. Finally, we are strengthened so that we may be of service to others within our congregation and beyond. Sunday morning is also a meaningful moment of pause in our busy lives to renew our spirits. You may be wondering how to bottle the Sunday morning experience so that you can bring it home, taking sips or gulps each day to nourish your soul. How can we extend the aliveness that we experience on Sunday mornings throughout our week?

Family Faith Practices is a family ministry resource that offers guidance and resources to bridge the Sunday morning experience with your home life. With a few exceptions, the content is authored by the current and previous ministers of First Unitarian Church of Dallas, Texas.

When we gather each Sunday it is to worship. The Old English root of the word “worship” means considering, shaping, and proclaiming what is of worth. Worship grounds us in what is most worthy of our life’s attention, connects us with the purpose of life, and reminds us of our interdependence with others and with the spirit that moves within all life, which some call God. Worship is a form of spiritual practice, but not the only form. There are many group and communal spiritual practices that we can engage in that help us to deepen and live our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Like regularly attending worship, intentional and mindful spiritual practice “works on” us and is transformative. The “Spiritual Practice” series offered at First Unitarian Church of Dallas as part of our *Faith Forward: From Visitor to Leader* adult faith development path encourages us to engage in daily practice, weekly worship, monthly service, a yearly retreat, and once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage. This is how we can have a full and nourishing spiritual life. Some practices are best done alone, but others can be practiced with others, including our own families and loved ones. This booklet focuses on those practices that we do together.

John Roberto of LifelongFaith Associates proposes four key faith practices for families:

1. Caring Conversations
2. Prayer and Reflection
3. Rituals and Traditions
4. Service

How do you and your family incorporate these faith practices into your life? How you adapt these practices for your family will change over time, as your family changes and grows, but people of all ages can engage in these four faith practices. Let this booklet be a guide.



CARING CONVERSATIONS

At church we have caring conversations in our classes, small group ministry, and pastoral care. At home, families can engage in caring conversations through supportive listening and sharing stories – about your day, your faith, and your values. These conversations can occur at transition points in the day, or at a time set aside for family spiritual practice.

A caring conversation goes to a deeper level than the typical “how was your day?” exchange. It takes these conversations the next step by asking questions such as “how did I live my values and my faith?” Caring conversations help people of all ages reflect on how they relate to themselves, others, and to the holy. They are, therefore, by nature spiritual conversations. Adults can model this level of depth for children by taking conversations a step beyond “I had a good/bad day.”

ENGAGE CHURCH THEMES

Use the reflection questions from Sunday classes or small group ministry, or reflect on the monthly/yearly theme, the sermon, or story for all ages. These may serve as a starting point for caring conversations with your family. If using story as the basis for caring conversations, you can ask questions that help family members imagine themselves in the position of different characters. For example:

How do you think _____ feels?

If you were _____, what would you have done?

Are there times when you have felt/acted like _____?
What was that like?

THE EXAMEN

The Examen is a practice that comes from the Ignatian spiritual tradition. St. Ignatius of Loyola was a Spanish priest and theologian in the 16th Century who founded the Jesuit order. Known for his imaginative narrative practices in *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius also suggested a daily practice of an "examination of conscience." Known as The Examen, this practice is a mindful review of your day, in which you reflect on your awareness of the sacred in everyday moments.

This Examen can be done alone or as a family. The following is a guide for how to practice it with others. While Caring Conversations can happen at many times – over a meal, in the car driving to/from church or school, etc. – bedtime and bath time can be especially calm and peaceful moments for such conversations.

Begin with a moment of quiet. Light a candle or ring a bell. Review the last 24 hours or the period since your last Examen. Where have you been? Who was with you? Bring to mind your experiences in the morning, afternoon, and evening. What were you feeling in each of those times?

Invite each person to answer two questions. Encourage each person to share about their experiences that day with specific details and sensory experiences. What were the sights, sounds, and smells of these moments?

The simplest questions are: What did I feel good about today? What was my biggest struggle today, or when did I feel sad, helpless or angry?

Other ways of asking these questions include:

For what moment today am I most grateful? For what moment today am I least grateful?

When did I feel most fully alive today? When did I most feel life draining out of me?

When did I give and receive the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today?

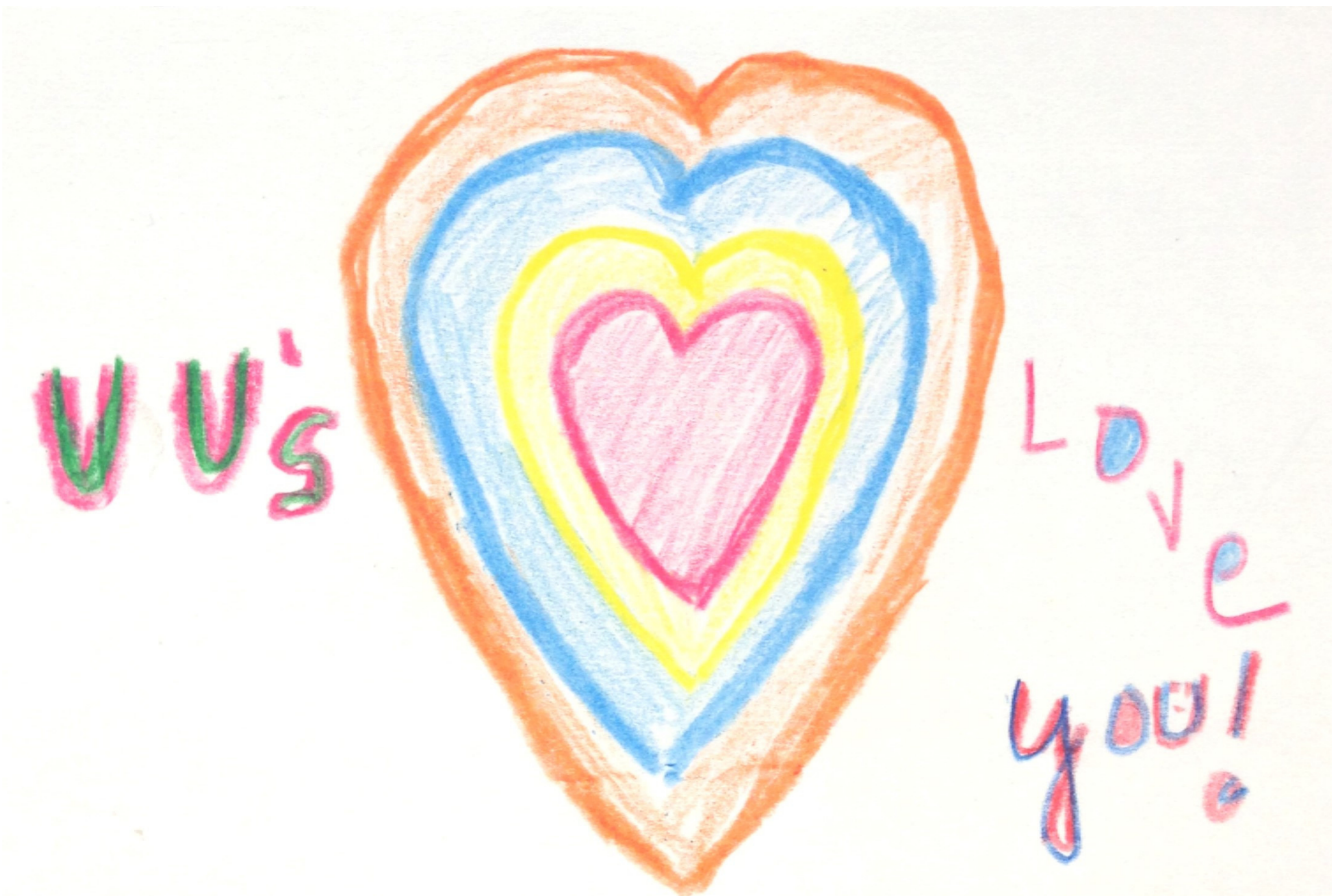
When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, the Divine, and the universe? When did I have the least sense of belonging?

When was I happiest today? When was I saddest?

What was today's high point? What was today's low point?

When doing the Examen with children, feel free to adjust the wording of the questions to match their everyday usage.

Conclude the Examen by giving thanks for the insights revealed in this process, and lifting up in prayer how you wish to respond. What new awareness do you wish for, and what do you hope to do differently?



PRAYER AND REFLECTION

At church we pray and reflect during worship, and in other group settings where we pause to mark the sacred nature of our time together or to ground us in what we are doing. At home, families can engage in prayer and reflection in the morning and at bedtime, around meals, or alone at any time of day or night. Prayer is not something that has to be elaborate and formal – it can be quite simple, and therefore done anywhere.

PERSPECTIVES ON PRAYER

Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter: *Prayer is a peculiar kind of speech that acts, and a peculiar kind of action that speaks to the depths and heights of being. Prayer seen from a distance seems to be all talk, praising, cajoling, or pleading with God. But I think to pray is to act.*

Rev. Aaron White: *In my life, prayer means taking time in which I am deliberate in practicing a deeper, more meaningful relationship with life itself. This relationship changes me and moves me to act on my values in the world.*

Rev. Beth Dana: *Prayer is words that come from the heart, and return to transform it. Prayer is not about changing situations outside of us. It's about transforming ourselves, helping us connect to self and others and God so that we may cause change to ripple through the interdependent web.*

In 1963, Unitarian Universalist minister Christopher Gist Raible was approached by a young girl, Nancy, who asked him about a bedtime prayer. The following was his response:

Dear Nancy,

You may not have realized it, but when you asked me to suggest a bedtime prayer for you, you raised a very important question. It is a question which people have wondered about and argued about for thousands of years. It is a question which many people think they can answer, but they answer it in different ways. It is a question which many other people are not sure can be answered. The question is this: is there a God who can change people and change things if asked to?

Some believe that God can give them presents or make it rain or cure their troubles if they ask God in the right way. Some people believe that asking God for help is a way of feeling closer to God, no matter what happens in response. Some people believe that God will do what is best for everybody and that to ask God for special favors is selfishness. Some people believe that God is the force of nature, so we cannot pray to God any more than we can pray to a tree or a stone. Some people believe that we ought to think about people and not about God at all.

As you learn more about the world and about other's beliefs, you will have to decide what you think about all this. With your parents' help, and with the help of others, you will form your own beliefs.

But you have asked me a question which can't wait until you have learned

more and thought more. You want me to suggest a bedtime prayer. I think I can help, if, for the time being at least, you think of prayer not as asking God for favors, but as an honest expression of some of your feelings. I especially mean three kinds of feelings. Sometimes you feel thankful for nice things which have happened to you. If you express your thanks at bedtime, you may enjoy them all over again. Sometimes you feel sorry for things which you have done or said. If you express your feeling of being sorry before you go to sleep, you may feel much better. Sometimes you have hopes for yourself and other people. If you express your hopes in prayer, you may see what you can do to make them come true.

I am suggesting that each night you make up your own prayer. It could begin...

“Tonight I am thankful for ...” and then you could think of the most important things you are thankful for. It could continue...

“Tonight I am sorry for ...” and then you could think of the most important things you are sorry about. Your prayer could then end with...

“Tomorrow I hope ...” and you could think of some of the most important things you hope for and think how you can help to bring them about.

When you do this, if you want to pray by thinking you are talking to God, go right ahead. But it doesn't matter as much as it does matter that you really mean what you say. I think you will discover that if you pray like this at night, it may not change God or change things or change other people, but it will change you and change how you think and feel about God and things and other people.

I hope you will want to talk with your parents about all this. You may want to talk to your friends of other religions to see what they think. Perhaps you will want to talk to your church school teacher or your minister. But whoever else you talk to, you will have to decide for yourself. How you work out your thinking and feeling about all this may well be one of the most important things in your life. But don't let that scare you. Understanding your feelings of gratitude and regret and hope is a wonderful process.

Thank you for asking!

*Your minister,
Christopher Gist Raible*

Retired Unitarian Universalist minister
Now living in Creemore, Ontario, Canada
Written in 1963. Slightly revised, 1983, 2015. Originally printed by UUA.
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At First Unitarian Church of Dallas, we address our pastoral prayer every Sunday to “God of Many Names, and Mystery Beyond Our Naming...” By using this language, we invite people into an inclusive prayer that acknowledges the diverse experiences and names we have for the divine. We also acknowledge that, ultimately, God is a mystery. We conclude our pastoral prayer with these words, by Rev. Robert Raible, minister of First Unitarian from 1942 to 1964:

*We pray in the names of all those known and unknown,
Present and absent,
Remembered and forgotten.
We pray in the names of all helpers of humankind.
Amen.*

When you pray, how are those known and unknown to you, those physically present and absent, those remembered and forgotten, and all helpers of humankind, present with you in your time of prayer? How do these people inform your spiritual life?

PRAYING IN THE MORNING

Praying in the morning is an opportunity to set your intentions for the day and to center yourself before the routines and demands of the day begin.

A prayer by Rev. Beth Dana:

*God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming
Fill me with the energy for a new day
May I meet others with an open mind*

*May I meet others with a loving heart
And may I meet others reaching out a helping hand
Amen.*

At First Unitarian Church of Dallas, we bless people throughout their lives with a rose and a spoken blessing. The following is an adaptation of this blessing for your morning prayer.

*May my thoughts be wise,
May my lips speak truth,
May my heart know love,
And may the work of my hands be blessed.*

PRAYING IN THE EVENING

Praying in the evening is an opportunity to reflect back on the day, put some of it to rest, and prepare yourself to rest before a new day.

Rev. Christopher Raible's suggestion – to pray about gratitude, regret, and hope – is one way of structuring one's evening prayer practice.

Here are some other beginnings for prayer:

*I am thankful for...
I am worried/concerned about...
I am sorry for...and want to make up for it by...
I hope for...
I dream of...
I wish for...
I pray for [names] that they [hope/intention]...*

A bedtime prayer by Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter:

*God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming
Hold us in our sleep
Comfort us in our dreams
Bless us in our waking.
Tonight we give thanks for... (people and things named here)
Amen.*

PRAYING WITH BEADS

Prayer beads are used in many religious traditions and cultures, including Unitarian Universalism. You can make your own string of beads to reflect your personal or family prayer practice, so that there is a tangible element to your morning and evening prayers. For example, you might choose three beads to represent gratitude, regret, and hope. As you pray, hold each bead in your hand, letting them be your guide.

PRAYING WITH TEXTS

Praying with texts is sometimes called sacred reading, or *Lectio Divina*. It centers on a text – a mantra, affirmation, scripture passage, poem, or quote that changes day to day, or one that you return to again and again seeking deeper layers of meaning. Praying with texts is not about reading to learn things, but rather to grow your soul. In reading the text, you look or listen for a word or phrase that jumps out to you, then try to understand the meaning or lesson that it has for your life.

1. First reading – Read to yourself or aloud. Listen for a word or phrase that captures your attention or imagination. Spend 1-3 minutes in silence. If you are with others, share the word or phrase with no commentary or discussion. If you are alone, write it down in a journal.
2. Second reading – Read the text to yourself or aloud for a second time. Listen for where the text relates to your life. It could be a different word/phrase than caught your attention the first time. Spend 1-3 minutes in silence. If you are with others, share the word or phrase with no commentary or discussion. If you are alone, write it down in a journal.
3. Third reading – Read the text to yourself or aloud for a third time. Listen for the invitation the text offers you. Spend some time journaling or reflecting on that invitation. If you are with others, share that experience.

Possible Sources:

A Grateful Heart: Daily Blessings for the Evening Meal from Buddha to the Beatles, Edited by M.J. Ryan

Life Prayers, From Around the world: 365 Prayers, Blessings, and Affirmations to Celebrate the Human Journey, Edited by Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon

Good Poems, Edited by Garrison Keillor

Singing the Living Tradition, Unitarian Universalist Association Hymnal

Sources of Our Faith, Edited by Kathleen Rolenz

PRAYING WITH MUSIC

The wonder and awe that comes with hearing a beautiful piece of music can be translated into one's personal and family spiritual practice through singing. Some singing brings peace and calm, and other times it brings a surge of uplifting power. The effect is amplified when singing with others. The Latin root word of "spirit" means "to breathe." Singing moves your breath inward and outward, creating a flow of breath, or spirit, connecting you with others around you. It also stirs emotions and creates beauty – all elements of spiritual experience.

An example from Rev. Beth Dana:

Several years ago at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, I was gathered with hundreds of people in a convention center ballroom, assembling my congregation's banner in anticipation of the opening celebration. Then, something happened in the middle of the room. One of the banner carriers from a congregation in Colorado had suffered a heart attack. At first there was confusion, but as word spread in the room we became silent. The paramedics arrived and as they began CPR, someone in the crowd quietly started singing "Spirit of Life." We joined in, until the entire room of people was singing this hymn and surrounding this man and the paramedics with our love. This was our prayer – invoking the Spirit of Life and

Compassion to move in their bodies and their hands, and to be with us as we witnessed his pain. We sang it until he was out of the building and on his way to the hospital. The man lived, but it wasn't our prayer that made it so. Our sung prayer held the space for this man, and for us, in a very difficult time.

The following are songs from our Unitarian Universalist hymnals that are easy for people of all ages to learn and sing. Families can sing these together in the morning or evening, or with a meal.

SLT 16 Simple Gifts
 SLT 21 For the Beauty of the Earth
 SLT 34 Though I May Speak With Bravest Fire
 SLT 101 Abide With Me
 SLT 354 We Laugh, We Cry
 SLT 362 Rise Up O' Flame (for chalice lighting)
 SLT 368 Now Let Us Sing
 SLT 388 Dona Nobis Pacem
 SLT 389 Gathered Here
 SLT 391 Voice Still and Small
 SLT 397 Morning Has Come
 SLT 409 Sleep, My Child
 SLT 410 Surprised by Joy
 STJ 1008 When Our Heart Is In a Holy Place
 STJ 1009 Meditation on Breathing

Sources: *Singing the Living Tradition* (SLT), *Singing the Journey* (STJ), *Come Sing a Song With Me* (UU Musicians Network). Another great source is *Rise Up Singing*, a collection of 1200 songs from a variety of genres, assembled by Annie Patterson and Peter Blood.

The song "Love Surrounds Us" by Ruth Gibson is sung to the tune of "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know." It is available as part of the Unitarian Universalist Association's Tapestry of Faith curriculum "Love Surrounds Us" - <http://tinyurl.com/jszgjru>.

Singing simple rhyming songs, such as "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" can also help prepare children for poetry and more complex songs.

PRAYING AT MEALS

On grace as a spiritual practice, by Rev. Aaron White: *Our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle states that we affirm and promote “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” I know, however, that in my life, it is often easy for me to overlook this deep interconnection of all things. It is tempting for me to turn on the water or lights in my home without a thought to how they work, or to sit down to a meal without taking time to express gratitude for all that went into bringing food to my plate. As Carl Sagan noted, it takes the entire universe to make an apple pie, just as it takes the sun, soil, farmers, drivers, roads, markets and so on to bring food to my body. For all of this, I am grateful. The Rev. Dr. Galen J. Guengerich, Senior Minister at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, asserts that gratitude might be the core theological approach of Unitarian Universalism. In an article in the UU World magazine, he wrote, “In the same way that Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, and Islam by submission, I believe that Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude.”*

Rev. White describes why saying grace before meals is a meaningful spiritual practice for families to adopt. Saying grace acknowledges that we have before us on the table gifts that we have not fully earned or created, and for which we should be grateful. Grace is a moment of deliberate gratitude, and doesn't have to be a big production.

Consider holding hands as a family while saying grace, symbolizing your unity. Light a candle on the table – it's a tangible symbol of this time set apart, a connection with the earth, and it makes a difference in creating sacred space. Encourage children to lead the family in saying grace.

At First Unitarian Church of Dallas, every Sunday we join together in saying the Affirmation of our church, followed by the sung Doxology. Other congregations say and sing similar Affirmations or Covenants. Meals can be a time for families to re-affirm their promises to one another and the world, and to connect their home rituals with what they experience at church. The following are our Affirmation and Doxology, with an adaptation of the Affirmation for families to say together.

Affirmation:

*Love is the doctrine of our church,
The quest of truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.*

*To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve humanity in fellowship,
To the end that all souls shall grow
in harmony with the Divine.*

Thus do we covenant with each other.

*Love is our way of life,
The search for truth is our quest,
And helping others is our prayer.*

*To live peacefully,
To learn freely,
To serve others,
So that all may know God.*

This, we commit to living,

In the best way we know how.

Doxology:

*From all that dwell below the skies
Let songs of faith and hope arise;
Let peace, goodwill on Earth be sung
Through every land, by every tongue.*

From Rev. Beth Dana: *My family rarely said formal prayers or graces before meals, but we did go around the table and each share something we were thankful for. It brings us together, and reflects where each of us is at emotionally and spiritually.*

Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman suggests taking a cue from Anne Lamott's book *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. Each person at the table can say:

One thing I can't do alone...

One thing I am grateful about...

One thing I think is amazing...

Prayer from Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter:

Bless us who have friends and families to share meals with.

Bless us who know love.

Bless us who honor the spirit of all life

And receive food we did not create.

Bless us now as we eat together in gratitude for this day.

Amen.

Prayer from Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman:

*God, we give thanks for the earth which gives us this food,
For all those whose labor brought it to us,
For hands that prepared this meal,
And love which abides.
Amen.*

Grace may also be sung.

The following is to the tune of Frère Jacques:

*We are thankful, we are thankful
For our food, for our food
And our family, and our church.
Amen. Amen.*

Another commonly sung grace is:

*Oh, the Earth's been good to me.
And so I thank the Earth
For giving me the things I need:
The sun and the rain and the apple seed;
The Earth's been good to me.*

Meals may also begin with a poem or scripture, or something from a book of short inspirational readings. It can be read by an adult or by older children as they learn to read.

Possible Sources:

A Grateful Heart: Daily Blessings for the Evening Meal from Buddha to the Beatles, Edited by M.J. Ryan

Life Prayers, From Around the world: 365 Prayers, Blessings, and Affirmations to Celebrate the Human Journey, Edited by Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon

Good Poems, Edited by Garrison Keillor

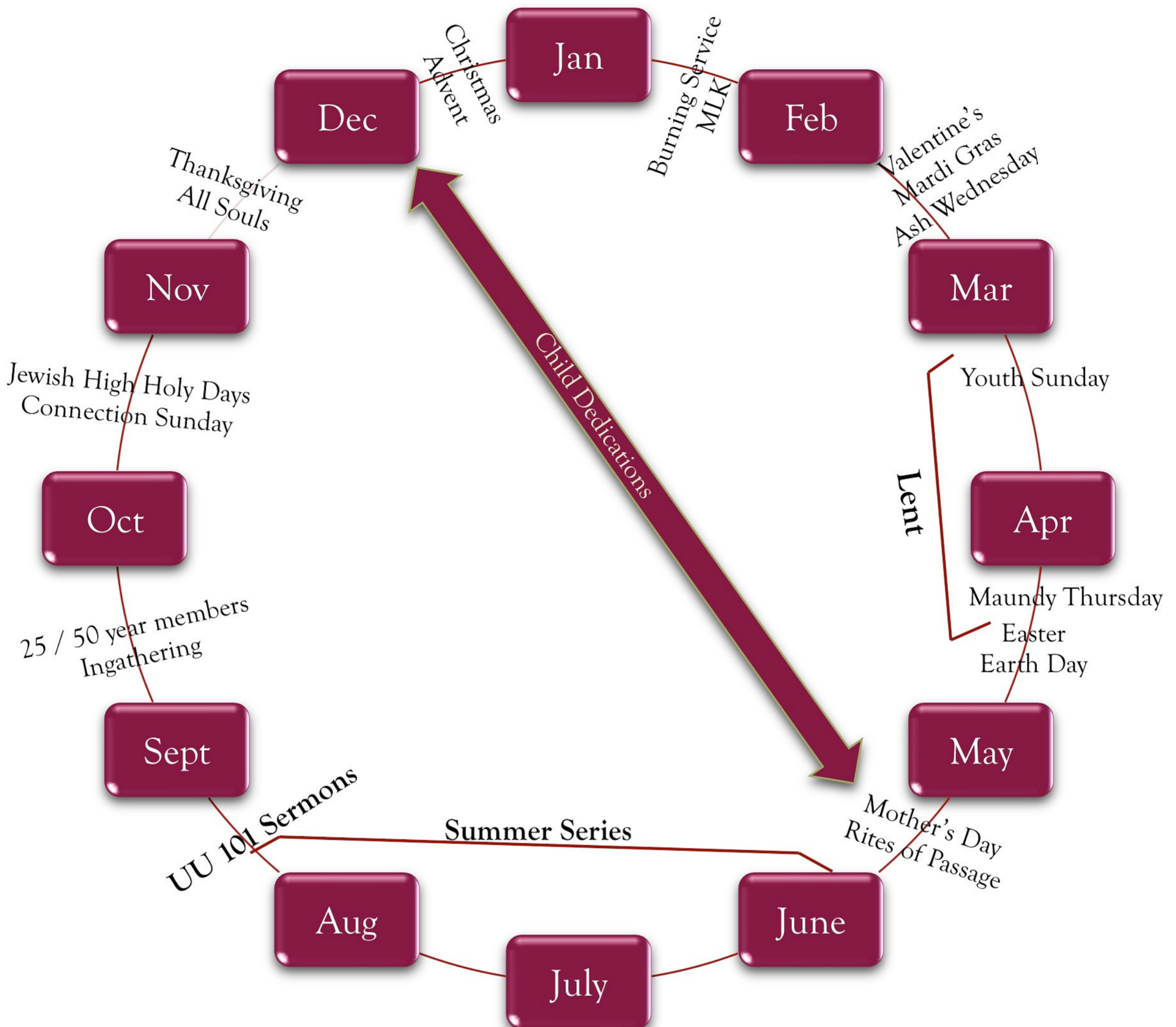


RITUAL AND TRADITION

At church we engage with ritual and tradition through worship, holiday services, and rites of passages such as child dedications, blessing the Coming of Age youth and graduating seniors, new member ceremonies, weddings, memorial services, honoring long-time members, and more. At home, families have many rituals, some imbued with more meaning than others. This booklet addresses both daily rituals, as well as those we enact to mark holidays or life milestones.

Our daily routines, celebrations, and rituals can be expressions of our most important religious and spiritual values. Ritual is an area of family life where children are natural leaders. Note where they are already enacting ritualistic behaviors and you may find out what areas of their lives are most important or meaningful. (Jeanne Nieuwejaar, *The Gift of Faith*, p. 56)

First Unitarian Church of Dallas has its own cycle of important rituals and celebrations throughout the liturgical year, depicted in the image below.



What does your family's liturgical year look like? Consider making a diagram like the one above, but specific to your family.

Family rituals and traditions draw from a variety of sources: your family cultural and religious background, our Unitarian Universalist tradition, and the new traditions you create as a family. For many families, attending weekly worship together and discussing it afterwards is a ritual. Rituals can be as simple as family meals, or celebrating birthdays, holidays, and milestones like the first day of school with meaning and intention. Some of the spiritual practices and prayers in this booklet, when repeated, may become a tradition for you.

LIFE MILESTONES

When we mark milestones in our lives, we are acknowledging that all of us are changing and growing, no matter our age or life stage. Naming these ordinary but sacred events – beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, and rites of passage – is the first step to creating rituals and traditions. In blessing and providing a visual or tangible reminder of the moment, we help shape and re-shape our identities and our faith.

Life milestone rituals mark a transition, therefore they are not only rooted in the realities or needs of now, but they also honor the past and imagine or set intentions for the future. In each transition, you might ask yourself:

“Who have I been?”

“Who am I now?”

“Who am I becoming? What is next for me?”

We can ask ourselves these questions many times over the course of a life – at coming of age, graduations, at job transitions, retirement, menopause, and in the transitions elaborated on below. The poem “You Begin” by Margaret Atwood conveys a beautiful message about how each of us is growing and changing, from childhood to adulthood – you might consider using it as a text in your family rituals.

There is a simple process for any life milestone ritual:

1. Gathering/Entry – light a chalice/candle
2. Storytelling – family story, story from Unitarian Universalism, scripture
3. Gesture or Ritual Act – past, present, future
4. Sending/Exit – with a prayer, blessing, and/or gift

The following are examples of life milestone rituals.

Examples of Life Milestone Rituals

Birthday

Do a “year in review,” reset behaviors, set intentions for the upcoming year.

To celebrate the birthday of a loved one who has died, First Unitarian Church of Dallas member Nancy Bateman shared this practice: We go out to dinner to celebrate their life and to talk about:

1. What they would think about current events, our life events, and the world in general
2. What we wish we could have shared with them from/during the past year

First Day of School

Blessing by Rev. Beth Dana:

As you go to school carrying a backpack full of the tools you will need to learn,

Remember who you are and what is important to you.

May you carry in your heart the spirit of your family and your faith:

Curiosity, imagination, courage, compassion, and [add others as you wish].

With a mind and heart open to the wisdom of others,

Gather what you find,

And may it change you, and change us,

As you share what you have learned.

Wedding Anniversary/Vow Renewal

Reaffirm your commitment to one another, say “I choose you,” revisit an important scripture or text from your relationship or wedding ceremony.

Miscarriage or Stillbirth

A ritual to mark a miscarriage or stillbirth could involve naming the child, planting a tree or plant, creating a memory box, and prayer expressing sadness and blessing the family/parents.

Child Dedication

While child dedications are typically celebrated in the context of a church community, there are additional ways that families can ritualize

this occasion at home. Invite each person in the family (children and adults) to share what their gift is for the spirit of the child, and how they hope to help them grow in body and spirit throughout their life.

Empty Nest

The transition that parents go through when their children grow up and leave home represents the leaving of one stage and the entry into a new stage of life. You might ritualize this by looking through old photos of the children who have left home. You might gather with other empty nesters – family or friends – to talk about what this new stage is like and how you want to grow. When gathering with other empty nesters, every few months you could prepare and send cards and goodies to your kids who have moved away, including some UU-related reading or gift.

New Home

Take a “tour” of your new home, spending time in each room reflecting on what you will do or experience there, and blessing the space for your living. Share your intentions for the kind of home and hospitality you want to create.

Death of Family Member, Friend, or Pet

Stories/Texts: *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst; *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs* by Tomie de Paola; *The Next Place* by Warren Hanson; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; for the death of a pet *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst

Ritual: If possible, the family can participate in the scattering or burial of ashes of the loved one. Gather and tell stories about the person, or if following Judith Viorst’s story of Barney each person names one good thing about the beloved pet.

Sending: Close with a prayer of gratitude for the life and love of the person or pet you have lost, naming the sadness that their life has ended, and praying that we will remember them in the days to come.

Life Milestone & Family Ritual Resources

The Book of New Family Traditions: How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays and Every Day by Meg Cox

Great Occasions: Readings for the Celebration of Birth, Coming-of-Age, Marriage, and Death by Carl Seaburg

Coming of Age: A Treasury of Poems, Quotations and Readings on Growing Up by Edward Searl

Beyond Absence: A Treasury of Poems, Quotations and Readings on Death and Remembrance by Edward Searl

Bless This Child: A Treasury of Poems, Quotations and Readings to Celebrate Birth by Edward Searl

We Pledge Our Hearts: A Treasury of Poems, Quotations and Readings to Celebrate Love and Marriage by Edward Searl

In Praise of Animals: A Treasury of Poems, Quotations and Readings by Edward Searl

HOLIDAYS

The holidays that your family chooses to celebrate are influenced by your family and religious background. Although you may not celebrate the same holidays in the same ways that you did growing up, you may bring some of the stories and elements of those celebrations from your family of origin into the family you create. Unitarian Universalism is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and we are a faith that is open to many different truths and honors the many paths that bring people to this religious community. We seek not to misappropriate others' cultures, but to celebrate those that are authentically ours. The holiday traditions described in this booklet reflect our roots, and in particular those holidays that are celebrated in worship each year at First Unitarian Church of Dallas. We hope you will join with your religious community to mark these holidays, while also finding ways to bridge that experience with what you do at home for these days and seasons.

New Year

Every year on the first Sunday of January, First Unitarian Church of

Dallas gathers for the burning service. Each person receives a slip of paper, and is invited to write on it the things they want to let go of from the past year so they can create space for something new. Then, following the sermon, we engage in a ritual of burning the paper in bowls at the front of the sanctuary. As the paper goes up in flames, so do those regrets, burdens, and events of the past, freeing us to embrace the new year with a sense of possibility.

Families can engage in a similar ritual at home. Gather around a table, with a candle in a fire-safe bowl in the middle. You might begin with a reading, such as “Burning the Old Year” by Naomi Shihab Nye (found on PoetryFoundation.org) or “Let Go” by Lois Van Leer (Found on the UUA website). Instead of a reading, you could also tell stories from the past year. Distribute slips of paper and invite everyone to write something they want to let go of and leave behind, then one by one burn the slips of paper. You might conclude the ritual by sharing, or writing down and posting somewhere visible, your hopes for the year ahead.

A prayer by Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter:

*God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming,
We seek you now in the holiness of life, the quiet of this day and our
hopes for a new year.*

*The paths we walk are strewn with the measures of our lives, our
choices, the demands set upon us, and the blessings.*

*Make us see the paths ahead, help us hold in esteem the paths behind,
and honor the changing tides of our lives with gratitude.*

Amen.

Ash Wednesday and Lent

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of Lent in the Christian calendar, which lasts from Mardi Gras to Easter. It is a day to acknowledge our mortality, a reminder that “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19), and an expression of the blessings and limitations of being human. On Ash Wednesday, the tradition is to place ashes on the forehead and repeat the words “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The astronomer Carl Sagan once said, “we are made of star-stuff.” Indeed, we human beings are made of star stuff, of earth, and

are connected to an interdependent web of all creation. Ash Wednesday is a humbling representation of this. If you do not have the opportunity to attend an Ash Wednesday service at church, your family can engage in its own ritual. Tell the story of Jesus' 40 days in the desert, and use ashes from your New Year burning ritual, or dirt from outside, smudging it on each other's foreheads or hands, repeating the words "remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." May it remind you of your connection with the earth, from which you come and to which you will return.

The ritual of Ash Wednesday prepares us to observe the season of Lent, when we continue to reflect on our limitations as humans. Some people do this by giving up a vice – chocolate, alcohol, complaining, or Facebook. In giving this up, they seek to be closer to God, to creation, or to what really matters. Others see Lent as an opportunity to take on a new practice, which will also bring them closer to these things. So, what might you give up and/or take on during the season of Lent?

One way of combining the practices of giving up and taking on is to choose as a family some cause or organization you would like to support financially, and then give up something (a treat, a latte, etc.) each day for the duration of Lent, putting the money you would have spent in a box/bowl, and then donating it when you reach Easter.

Easter

This is a day to celebrate with your religious community! At home, reflect on what you heard in the Sunday service. Tell the story of Easter, and the lasting legacy of Jesus' life and ministry. One good book for this is *Meet Jesus: The Life and Lessons of a Beloved Teacher* by Lyn Tuttle Gunney and Jane Conteh-Morgan. Written for young children, it introduces them to Jesus' lessons of love, kindness, forgiveness, and peace.

One question that may come up is the meaning of "resurrection" for Unitarian Universalists. When we talk of resurrection we are not referring to Jesus literally coming back from the dead. We are talking about the triumph of life over death, and the fact that the message and impact of Jesus' life lives beyond his death, and is "resurrected" every time we remember. We also talk about resurrection in terms of the

rebirth we see in nature all around us, and the resurrection of hopes and relationships.

A prayer by Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter:

God of many names and mystery beyond all naming,

Today we name you Risen.

Rise up in us, keep us alert to the unpredictable and unexplainable,

That by your grace we might be made into surprises.

*In the name of the one who taught surprises, healed with touch, amazed
with story, ate with sinners, broke bread, died and points to
resurrection,*

Teach us to live as if today is our last,

With love and a hope of peace.

Amen.

Jewish High Holy Days – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Rosh Hashanah marks the start of the new year in the Hebrew calendar, and the 10 days leading up to Yom Kippur. Rituals include sounding the shofar (a hollowed out ram's horn) to signal the new year, and eating apples dipped in honey to symbolize the sweetness of the new year. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, in which adults fast and offer prayers of regret for the past year, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation for the year to come. These days are an opportunity for families to acknowledge regrets from the past year. You might use the prayers offered in Chapter 2 for this purpose. Prayers of regret turn to meditation on forgiveness. In Unitarian Universalist settings, we often use the words of Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs: "I forgive myself. I forgive you. We begin again in love." These words, Rev. Eller-Isaacs says, acknowledge that the forgiver is an instrument of the holy, just as the person being forgiven is an expression of the holy.

All Souls Day

This day to remember the dead takes different forms in different cultures: All Saints Day or All Souls Day in Western and Eastern Christianity, Halloween, Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) in Mexico, and Samhain in Pagan and earth-centered traditions. It takes place somewhere between October 31 and November 2.

Rev. Daniel Kanter marks this holiday at home by getting up before the rest of his family and setting out photos of their ancestors who have died and lighting candles. The ancestors greet the family when they wake for the day.

Thanksgiving

A prayer by Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter:

God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming,

Hold us now in an embrace of your love

As we name you today gratitude.

Teach us to see blessings and blessings and blessings heaped upon

blessings...even in the shadows and the night...even in the struggles

and the failures...even in the midst of a troubled world. Let our litany

of thanksgiving include the air we breathe, the food we share, the love

of family and friends, as well as the sustaining world of human life we

count on.

Let our litany include the majesty of humanity

The presence of hope

And the presence of you.

We hold in love today all who struggle - may they have peace.

In thanksgiving, may we know its grace.

Amen.

A prayer by Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter:

God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming,

*We pray today a prayer of thanksgiving, for our creation, preservation,
and all the blessings of this life.*

We pray for ourselves and for each other,

And for communities around the world that need our prayers.

*We pray that gratitude and generosity infuse all our spirits and hearts
this day and every day.*

*We give thanks for the fruits of the many labors of those who have
harvested so much for our sake.*

*And finally, we pray that the greatest triumph of the world is for peace,
and that each of us might show forth our praise not only with our lips
but with our lives.*

Amen.

In addition to formal prayers, one way to begin the Thanksgiving meal is by going around the table and inviting each person to name something they're thankful for.

Advent

A prayer by Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter:

*God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming,
In this season of joy and peace, help us know joy, help us know peace.
Help us pause and look with eyes of wonder at the majesty of this day, at
the growing winter, at the hopes and dreams of a world that needs
peace.
This season calls us to dedication and wonder...may it be so.
Amen.*

One of the themes of Advent, the weeks leading up to Christmas and the celebration of the birth of Jesus, is peace. And yet, this holiday season is far from peaceful for many of us. It is especially important in this time to cultivate a spiritual practice – whatever form it takes – that creates space for silence and promotes peace.

Advent is also a season of the coming of light. In this dark time of year, when the daylight is short, many cultures and religious traditions celebrate holidays about light – Christmas, Hanukkah, Diwali, Kwanzaa, St. Lucia's Day, Yule.

Advent Calendars are a common way of celebrating this season, and are one way of counting down the days to Christmas. Traditional Advent calendars have a “window” to open each day, behind which you find a picture or a treat. There are also Advent calendars that encourage children to do something each day – e.g. help your parents, give someone a gift, etc.

The following Advent candle project, developed by Rev. Tandi Rogers, is another way of preparing ourselves for Advent and the coming of light.

There are five parts, which can be spread out over the span of four and a half weeks before Christmas, or you can spend an afternoon going through them all at once. The resulting candle is one intended to inspire and sustain you, and can be lit regularly at meal times or prayers.

Supplies: glass pillar candle, paper (tracing paper works well), markers and crayons and paints, scissors, glue, images from magazines or printed out

Step 1: What is In You In the Christian stories, the baby Jesus growing inside Mary comes from God. When we co-conspire or work together with the divine, goodness and love result for our lives and in the world. If you sit very, very still, what do you feel stirring inside your heart? What in you helps you to be yourself, to be good, and to do good in the world?

Take a moment and draw whatever images or words come into your mind. As you go about your day, add images and words to your paper, and paperclip magazine clippings to it. Set this all aside, but feel free to come back and add as things come to you.

Step 2: Your Guiding Star The Star of Bethlehem guided Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem to where Jesus, called the “Light of the World,” was born. It guided shepherds and kings to find the Light of the World. What is your guiding star? What is important to you, and what guides you toward goodness?

Do the same activity of gathering images and words as above.

Step 3: Making Way for Shelter Once Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem they were turned away again and again. As the story is told, there was simply no room at the Inn. Finally, they were offered the stable, a space reserved for lowly animals. What if the inn keeper had made room for Mary and Joseph? Imagine what might have happened in their life. When have you turned other people or ideas away because you couldn’t or wouldn’t make room? What could you clear out of your life to make room, to create a waiting shelter for new people and ideas?

Do the same activity of gathering images and words as above.

Step 4: The Dance of Darkness and Light Advent is in the darkest time of the year. Many creatures hibernate. What is hibernating, or laying quietly sleeping, within you? What do you wish could come out of hibernation and into the light? How can you make that happen? What light do you want to send out to the world? Imagine this light becoming big and bright.

Do the same activity of gathering images and words as above.

Step 5: Candle Creation Lay out all the images and look at them. How are they connected? What images stand out for you? What images seem no longer important? You can set those aside. Looking at all the images, does a scripture or hymn come to mind? What prayer emerges? What do you need to say “yes!” to the coming Light?

Now is the time to assemble the images and words and glue them onto your candle. Consider cutting pictures and words from your journal pages to glue onto the glass. Once the reflection candle is just the way you want it, light it and sit quietly with it. Bask in its glow. Take in this collage of images and words. What ideas or prayers come to mind?

Closing Benediction: May this candle collage inspire and sustain you. May this candle be a guiding light. Remember you come from Light and at the same time you are Light of and for the world. Go out and spread bright blessings. The world is waiting.

Christmas

Beyond the gift-giving and family meals, there are small but meaningful ways of celebrating Christmas that connect with this day as a religious holiday. Read or tell the story of Jesus’ birth. Remind one another that we tell and re-tell this story because Jesus was a great teacher, and his teachings are still important today. Christmas is about the birth of Jesus, but it’s also about you. Each child born can be a helper. At your family meal, you might go around the table each sharing your hopes for others, or how you can help others. Other family Christmas traditions include caroling, or volunteering at a community Christmas dinner.

Christmas Doxology from First Unitarian Church of Dallas:

Lift up your voices loud and clear:

Sing in a season of good cheer.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Let peace, goodwill on Earth be sung

Through every land by every tongue.

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Celebrating the Seasons

Plan a special activity for the first day of every new season. For example, plant a tree or do something good for the earth to celebrate the beginning of spring, make a wreath from clippings at the beginning of winter, or eat a meal with seasonal foods. These practices help us notice changes in weather and patterns of nature to which we wouldn't normally be attuned.

Earth-centered traditions mark quarterly solstices or equinoxes, as well as their mid-points:

Imbolc (early February)

Themes: hearth and home, preparation for spring

Spring Equinox (March 21)

Themes: new life and light

Beltane (early May)

Themes: fertility, crops, growth

Summer Solstice (June 21)

Themes: longest day of the year, fire and light

Lammas (early August)

Themes: prosperity, generosity, fruitfulness

Fall Equinox (September 21)

Themes: thanksgiving, harvest

Samhain (October 31-early November)

Themes: honoring ancestors, death and rebirth

Winter Solstice (December 21)

Themes: renewal, world peace, light and darkness



SERVICE

Serving others and working for justice is not just something we do because it's the right thing to do. It is how we live our Unitarian Universalist faith and values in a public way that impacts others directly while also transforming our relationships and ourselves. We do service work because we recognize that we are part of an interdependent web of all existence, and therefore our well-being is linked with the well-being of all of creation. But we do not do it only to help others; we do it for ourselves, so that we can become more aware of our relatedness and our connection with all of life.

Engaging in service and justice work as a family is a way of building faith together. When parents/caregivers and children engage in this work together, it is a way of modeling what is important to your family and faith community and how everyone can act to make a difference.

Service, whether at church or in the wider community, is a way of saying “I am part of this community” and giving back, acknowledging all you have been given.

Service is not just an activity that we do occasionally when we go somewhere to volunteer. It’s also a way we relate and act on a daily basis. It can be helpful to have the structure of a monthly family service/justice project, but it’s also important to live day to day in a way that promotes service and expresses a generosity of spirit toward others.

Service takes many different forms, such as: helping a neighbor, organizing a park cleanup, showing up at the Food Bank together, or volunteering at a church event. One way of finding service opportunities for your family is paying attention the needs around you in your community. You can also ask your church what volunteer/service opportunities are available.

Find ways of serving within your congregation and your community, and most importantly *reflect* on it with your family afterwards. You could invite children to draw a picture, create a collage, or write a letter or journal about their experience. The following questions can spark discussion:

What was your favorite part? What was most difficult?

How did you make a difference?

What did you learn, and how have you been changed?

What can you do beyond today to continue this work?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Doing Good Together (www.doinggoodtogether.org)

This organization, and its Big Hearted Families Program, provides tools for families to raise compassionate children who are engaged in their communities in meaningful ways. The website includes a collection of activities, resources, projects, and other support for including compassionate service in your daily family life.

31 Ways to Change the World by We Are What We Do

Creating Justice Together: Service Projects for Families and Multigenerational Groups by Susan Dana Lawrence

I Can Make a Difference: A Treasury to Inspire Our Children by Marian Wright Edelman

Moody Cow Learns Compassion by Kerry Lee MacLean

Tiger and Mouse: The Gift of Helping Others by Theodore Allen Lightfoot

Have You Filled a Bucket Today? A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids by Carol McCloud

What If Everybody Did That? by Ellen Javernick

Sadie: The Paper Crown Princess by Amanda N. Evans

For Dallas Unitarian Universalists

Wee Volunteer (www.weevolunteer.org)

Provides age appropriate service projects for preschool and elementary school age children with local non-profits.



CREATING SACRED SPACE

Sacred space is the place where we meet others and tell our stories. It stirs our memories and becomes the occasion of hope... Earthy and material, it is also transcendent because it is created and sustained by personal and communal meaning. Sacred place is ordinary place ritually set apart to be extraordinary. It becomes sacred because of the ritual acts performed there.

*-Jack Rathschmidt and Gaynell Bordes Cronin,
in *Rituals for Home and Parish**

Whenever an individual, family, or congregation gathers for ritual or worship, we create sacred space. In the sanctuary, we create sacred space with the seating arrangement, candles, art, words, and music that foster an experience of hospitality, beauty, and peace.

Think about where you experience the holy. It could be inside a congregation, in nature, at your home, or in some other special place. What are the characteristics of that space? How does the environment engage the senses – sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste? How does the space reflect your faith or nurture it? Consider bringing some of these characteristics into your home. Some families create a home altar, with objects and mementos that are meaningful to them. Make sure each person has an opportunity to contribute something to the altar, especially children. The altars might change with the seasons or as things happen in your family. Be creative!

In Unitarian Universalist communities, we mark sacred time and space by lighting a flaming chalice, sometimes accompanied by words. Lighting the chalice symbolizes that we have formally entered into a special time together. Consider having a chalice in your home that you can light for meals, rituals, or other important times. You can buy chalices from UU sources, use small dishes or votive candle holders, or you can use unconventional materials. Find some inspiration in the following article written by Rev. Beth Dana.

DIY CHALICES

It has happened to all of us. We're planning a worship service, ritual, or meeting – and there's NO CHALICE! What can you do? Be creative!

Here are some ideas for how to create a chalice out of objects you'd typically find around a house or church.

Simple Yet Spiritual

Arrange votive candles in a circle on an altar or table. You can also place other sacred objects or stones in the middle of the circle.

The Terra Cotta Flower Pot Chalice

If you have a flower pot and a flower pot base, you've got a chalice! Turn the flower pot upside down and balance the base on top of it. Put a votive candle in the base. This type of chalice can either be glued together with a glue gun, or kept separate so that it's more portable.

Terra cotta flower pot chalices can be personalized by painting or decorating them as you wish! Decorate them to represent your own UU identity. Write words around them like “Truth, Love, Justice.”

The Kitchen Cupboard Chalice

All you need is a cup and a bowl. Turn the cup upside down, and place the bowl (right-side up) on top of it. Then place a votive candle in the bowl.

The Camping Gear Chalice

With a flashlight (the flame), a big cup, and a paper plate you can create a chalice in your own kitchen! Place the flashlight, light shining up, into a big cup. Then cut a circle in the middle of a paper plate just big enough to fit around the outside of the cup.

The Gigantic Chalice

If you like to do things *large scale*, you can create a chalice out of a bird bath! Everyone can contribute by painting or drawing something meaningful on it. What a lasting spiritual model of teamwork!

The Build-At-Home Altar

All you need is a chalice table, a chalice pillar, and a chalice top. The chalice table could be a bench, a step stool, or a desk. The chalice pillar could be a vase, a brick, or a block. Top this with a cup or a bowl, and you’ve got a chalice! Personalize your altar with plants, rocks, or other objects.

The Lego™ Chalice

If New York City toy store F.A.O. Schwartz can make a 7-foot tall Empire State Building out of Legos, why not make a chalice? You can make it as simple or as elaborate as you want.

Good luck! And may you never be without a chalice.

a prayer for home

by Pennock Orr, Youth Sunday 2011, First Unitarian Church of Dallas

God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming, We pray that, despite the confusion that muddles this world, we can find our place in it and help those who have not... To feel and know that the overwhelming kindness in ourselves is as much a shelter as the walls around us, and a safety that drowns out even the grandest secession, That we are whole, That we are at a home that we never left.

Dear God, we pray that we can see past the barriers between us and that others can do so as well, That we can all live knowing we belong- wherever we are, To be wrapped in a blanket of joy that only home and its inhabitants can bring.

We pray that everyone can be brought in, that all can be welcomed and that all can be thanked. We hope that each of us can make the journey to find where we are truly ourselves. To know how many we have laughed with and loved along the way.

We pray that all of us can find that holy spot, the little patch that illuminates the universe and lets us know we “made it”. We pray that we can rise to our capacity to love and be loved.

We thank everyone, every last human being. From the young to the old, living and gone, friends and enemies, family and passerby, for their contribution to making this world a little more like home. Amen.

closing words

Family life is overflowing with work and school, activities and homework, and day-to-day responsibilities. Because of this, family members of all ages need opportunities to pause and be still, to come together, and attend to matters of the spirit. Being part of a church community and engaging in faith practices as a family should not be one more thing to do, but something that recharges and sustains you as you go about your days.

I hope you have found in this booklet some thing, or many things, that you can incorporate into your family life. I have offered a lot of suggestions, but your family will find the structure and rhythm that feels authentic and right to you. This booklet is about bridging the Sunday morning experience with home life. As long as there is somewhere to land on the home side of that bridge, you're off to a great start. Begin with something simple, and see what your family gravitates toward. Let the children in your family guide you, for they will often develop rituals on their own.

I wish you and your family a deep and fulfilling spiritual life, grounded in our Unitarian Universalist faith, and connected with a community of friends in faith who remind you that you are not alone.

Blessings,
Rev. Beth Dana



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