**UU Blessing Path**

**A UU Framework to Spiritual Maturity**

**Adult Lifelong Learning Program**

Steven Mead, Lifespan Religious Educator

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Table of Contents

[A Profound Bias 2](#_Toc59441893)

[Description 2](#_Toc59441894)

[Four core UU experiences 2](#_Toc59441895)

[Organizing our UU communities around our four core experiences 3](#_Toc59441896)

[Our ‘Integrated Self’ and Right Relationship 3](#_Toc59441897)

[Praxis 3](#_Toc59441898)

[Outcomes 3](#_Toc59441899)

[Description UU Blessing Path summary table 4](#_Toc59441900)

[Program Structure 4](#_Toc59441901)

[Introduction 4](#_Toc59441902)

[Contemplation and action 4](#_Toc59441903)

[Contemplation—the readings 4](#_Toc59441904)

[Order of readings (refer to Exhibit) 5](#_Toc59441905)

[Action and spiritual practices 5](#_Toc59441906)

[Session Outline 5](#_Toc59441907)

[Sample Publicity Copy 5](#_Toc59441908)

[Bibliography 6](#_Toc59441909)

[Exhibit 7](#_Toc59441910)

# A Profound Bias

I believe that our denomination engages in ‘human being training.’ We gather not merely to see our friends but to turn out better human beings, both individually and collectively. I see a deep and abiding need to balance Unitarian Universalism’s elevation of our intellectual quotient with a corresponding emphasis on our emotional quotient and civic engagement. To be fair, we appear to address all these things haphazardly, but seldom as a coherent [*praxis*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Praxis_(process)). [Thus, the UU Blessing Path framework.] I think we exist to fashion people who are ‘spiritually mature.’ I further think the achievement of spiritual maturity is manifested by a full measure of ‘unitive consciousness,’ a viewpoint favored by many of our UU Sources.

I am an adherent of [perennial philosophy](http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/resources/default.aspx?Category=Perennial%20Philosophy&ID=91) or perennial wisdom tradition if you prefer that term. All my life experience and observation point me to this way of living in the world. I think perennial philosophy is eminently compatible with Unitarian Universalist theology, hermeneutics, and exegesis. It is a small leap for me from our historical belief in one god/deity to one unitive consciousness.

There you have it, I believe 1) we gather to create spiritually mature people, and 2) that achieving spiritual maturity involves fashioning ourselves in such a way that we *know* unitive consciousness in our heads, *understand* it in our hearts, and finally *embody* it in right action at the place where ‘spirit meets the bone’. Whether that understanding of unitive consciousness is approached through the Hindu expression ‘[I am that’](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Am_That) (or ‘thou are that’), [unitive consciousness/non-dual thinking](https://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/3DC789542EBC5B58/746557FA0D37A13EC67FD2F38AC4859C), or [Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitakuye_Oyasin) or many similar expressions by contributors to the perennial wisdom tradition does not matter to me very much. These two assumptions are embedded throughout the UU Blessing Path.

# Description

## Four core UU experiences

Emerging, evolving, and maturing over a decade of religious education and program ministry, in serving my UU communities I have found it very helpful to focus on four core experiences that most UU communities commit to:

1. The experience of **Becoming**by **listening**to our deepest self
2. The experience of **Belonging**by **loving**our neighbors
3. The experience of **Engaging**by **serving**needs greater than our own
4. The experience of **Being**by **opening**to life’s gifts

Are there more than these experiences? To be sure. Are these four the ‘right’ four? Maybe. Do other UU communities express these experiences with different terms and language? Absolutely. There is nothing profound or new about these foci. Are there other frameworks to achieve spiritual maturity? Many. The UU Blessing Path is a contender, nothing more. [In fact, as I develop programming for children, youth, and adults, I try to balance annual content among these four core experiences.]

## Organizing our UU communities around our four core experiences

Our UU communities put a lot of resources toward these experiences. I like to express it this way:

1. The experience of **Becoming**through **Learning** programs
2. The experience of **Belonging**through **Community Life** programs
3. The experience of **Engaging**through **Justice-Making** programs
4. The experience of **Being**through **Worship and Spirituality** programs

## Our ‘Integrated Self’ and Right Relationship

As a covenantal denomination, I find it helpful to think of relating these core experiences to various aspects of ‘right relationship’ like so:

1. The experience of **Becoming**—right relationship to our **unique** self (identity)
2. The experience of **Belonging**—right relationship to our **communal** self (with others)
3. The experience of **Engaging**—right relationship to our **interconnected** self (with the world/cosmos)
4. The experience of **Being**—right relationship to our **universal** self (with the Ultimate)

These four aspects of ‘self’ comprise our ‘integrated’ self.

# Praxis

Thus, our experiences, programs, relationships *all* need to be coordinated and developed. The UU Blessing Path seeks to develop *all* of these through a curated reading list, intentional spiritual practices, and monthly discussions among its practitioners (see Program Structure below), and a ‘head-heart-hands-soul’ approach. Many spiritual practices cultivate our experiences and promote right-relationship. The UU Blessing Path emphasizes four:

1. The experience of Becoming by [**listening**](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/23/nurturing)to our deepest self
2. The experience of Belonging by [**loving**](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/21/love)our neighbors
3. The experience of Engaging by [**serving**](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/18/justice)needs greater than our own
4. The experience of Being by [**opening**](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/24/openness)to life’s gifts

Facilitators may wish to choose or adopt other similar spiritual practices that suit their community.

# Outcomes

If focusing on experiences, programs, and relationships prove successful for your UU community, then the individual succeeds in being balanced, whole, fulfilled, and open. The UU community gains as well with members who are grounded, connected, engaged, and wise. The Big Wide World gains citizens who are civilized, socialized, actualized, and realized.

## Description UU Blessing Path summary table



# Program Structure

## Introduction

These days, I am reluctant to schedule more than three sessions of any adult program. There is a tremendous amount of reading in this program. My imagination tells me, one reading per month for this program. Then a discussion of that work. Well, that’s 24 months. That’s a long time to commit to adult learning. This is not a path, Steven, it’s hiking the Appalachian Trail of UUism. So, is this a class? A small group? Don’t know. You decide. I am thinking of this program as a group but also inviting drop-ins (more like a class)—so, a hybrid model. Although there is a gestalt to this framework, there is not so much serial learning from one monthly session to the next that it would prevent someone attending ad hoc from benefitting.

“Action without thought is empty. Thought without action is blind.”― Kwame Nkrumah

## Contemplation and action

This offering is about both contemplation *and* action (the most important word there is *and*)—contemplation of the various works and our response to them as well as acting out our faith in intentional ways. The contemplation aspects of the program are more directed but the approach to spiritual practices much less so. I am willing to trust participants to know what right actions are beneficial and appropriate to them. Many participants will come to this program with embodied practices already.

## Contemplation—the readings

There is nothing magical about my reading choices, only that I wanted to explore acknowledged ancient, modern, and contemporary voices. As time goes by, I would likely change these initial recommendations! No doubt you will have favorite reading selections that you are more familiar with and enthusiastic about. So, use them! As I developed my list, to my no great surprise I found nonfiction more appropriate for the intellectual (head) component, but that fiction was more potent (and interesting to me) for the emotional/intuitive (heart) focus. I think that this approach has merit and would recommend that you follow at least this formula as you choose your works. Every participant should get a copy of the Exhibit.

*Grateful acknowledgment to reading content consultants, Rev. Gail Marriner, Rev. Sarah Gibbs-Millspaugh, Maj-Britt Eagle, and Mim Chapman.*

## Order of readings (refer to Exhibit)

I haven’t figured this out for myself. To some extent, I am willing to and intend to be led by what participants want to read next. I *don’t* recommend doing all the ancient voices first, followed by modern and contemporary content. I am *strongly* inclined to rotate through *becoming, belonging, engaging*, and *being* content (while mixing up the choices between nonfiction (head) and fiction (heart)—then rinse and repeat. You decide for yourself. I might lead just a ‘contemporary voices’ subset, thus covering only eight readings in about as many months.

## Action and spiritual practices

This is an adult learning experience—as such, your participants will vary widely on the extent and maturity of their intentionally pursued spiritual practices. So, I recommend being very flexible and ‘go with what you got’ and ‘meet your participants where they are at’ approach. There are so many spiritual direction resources available to us, that I did not think it necessary to list them out for you. I do link to [Spirituality & Practice](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/) and think they are a valuable resource to beginners, more advanced practitioners, and religious educators. You may wish to apply different spiritual practices than the one’s I have identified, but I believe that these four have wide application across our denomination. Add other practices to these four as your group dynamics emerge. I know I will.

# Session outline

I prepared this curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic, so I envisioned this as an online offering. It would work even better in person. I envision a monthly 1.5-2-hour discussion session. I provide only a general approach in this curriculum below, leaving plenty of room for your style, method, and expression. Generally,

* **Chalice lighting and reading**, which you should prepare for in advance
* **Check-in.** A guided check-in question, which you should prepare for in advance
* **Contemplation**. A discussion about the relevant month’s reading. I strongly suggest you have a few pithy or provocative questions prepared to jump-start the conversation or rescue a discussion that is struggling
* **Action**. A spiritual practice check-in (see Exhibit). You may elect to do this either covenant group style (no fixing, no saving, no setting one another straight! (ala Parker Palmer) or discussion style, or a little of both—decide what is best for you and your group
* **What’s next**? A short discussion on what the next reading assignment will be
* **Closure and closing reading**

# Sample Publicity Copy

Through a curated reading list of ancient, modern, and contemporary works (fiction and nonfiction) and intentional spiritual practices, we will explore what it means to be human through the perspective of Unitarian Universalism. What does it mean to be in right relationship with the self? With others? With the world? With the Ultimate? What insights might be gained from these celebrated works? What is spiritual maturity? What balance should we seek between contemplation and action? How might the UU Blessing Path transform you? Join us reading and discussing these works and our various spiritual practices, meeting online monthly. Drop-ins welcome.

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*Particular publishers or publication dates are not too important to this curriculum. Find and use what’s available!*

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# Exhibit

The UU Blessing Path Course Matrix