

ELIOT UNITARIAN CHAPEL



# VALUES DISCOVERY 2015

EXPERIENCES OF THE HOLY

May 31, 2015

Corporations have values important to their shareholders and customers. Governments and NGO's have values important to their clients. Religious organizations have values that arise from their religious beliefs and practices. For members of Unitarian Universalist congregations, values are associated with experiences of the holy, experiences rich with meaning, both intimate and ultimate. This paper summarizes why and how the congregation of Eliot Unitarian Chapel engaged in a values discovery process, and the results and implications of that process.

#### Motivation:

The 2014-2015 church year was an opportune time for a values discovery process due to:

- Our lead minister was new to Eliot Chapel, starting her second year
- The Board Of Trustees was maturing in Policy Governance
- The last values process had been performed during the interim period 2010-11
- The current mission statement was of unknown age and provenance

In the three years since the Appreciative Inquiry process, accomplished by the Transition Team, the church was now "under new management", and a round of strategic alignment between the congregation, lay and clergy leadership seemed in order. Since the Board decided that the Mission, Vision and Ends Statements were in scope, best practices indicated that refreshing the values was the place to start. The goal of the values discovery process was to identify 3-4 values that reflect the congregation's core values, and which would be used as input to subsequent work.

#### The Process:

The process we used was adapted from a video entitled "Lighting the Leadership Chalice – Governance Part 1 – Experience of the Holy", published on YouTube on Sept 1, 2012. It features a values discovery process led by Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs, Co-Minister, Unity Church, St. Paul, MN, recorded at a UU regional conference meeting in 2009. We found the process attractive for its potential to involve a large number of congregants through small group meetings with low time commitment, as well as its use of story-telling and intuitive faculties rather than discussion. The Board experienced the process at its Retreat and found it meaningful and productive. In January-February, 2015, 5 facilitators (including one youth) conducted 11 small group meetings involving 59 congregants. [Attachment A contains the scripts used by the facilitators.] Using the forms completed in all meetings, the Values Discovery team reviewed the words that had not been promoted to take forward, to insure that no popular words were omitted from the final list. This phase of the process resulted in the indented words shown in Attachment B.

The Eliot Senior High Youth Group performed a separate experience of the holy exercise, led by Elena Bowland and Hannah Biggs, using the small group process. The outcome of their discernment was somewhat different than the rest of the congregation, and highlights values of particular relevance to the younger generation. [See Attachment C.]

#### Curation:

We expected (from the Rev. Eller-Isaacs video) that only a few words would emerge since, he suggested, experiences of the holy have similar characteristics across cultures. However, no dominant winners emerged, and the resulting list of 25 words needed curation to achieve the goal of 3-4 values. The Values Discovery core team met, and discerned that these values words could be clustered around three

core values. These clusters are graphically depicted below, with the core value shown in the largest font size in each of the three depictions:

Discovery

*Inspiration*

HOPE

Courage **Awe**

*Open to Mystery*

Gifts of Spirit

Mindfulness

Inclusiveness

*Belonging*

**Connection**

Shared experience

Community **Safety**

Friendship

Interconnection

*Love*  
 Generosity  
 Goodness  
**Compassion**  
 Caring action  
 Selflessness  
 Humility      Service  
 Outreach

The Values Discovery core team noticed that the dictionary definitions of the core values did not capture the rich range of meanings connoted by the value words in the cluster. For example, the definition of compassion as “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it” can be associated with pity and a condescending attitude, not consistent with the terms “humility” and “selflessness”. The team thought the Buddhist concept of compassion was closer, in which compassion “springs from a sense of the equality and interconnectedness of life”, and is about “empowering others, helping them unlock strength and courage from within their lives in order to overcome their problems.” [Soka Gakkai International [sgi.org](http://sgi.org)]. When Steven Mennerick, Board Chair, announced the three values in the April Newsletter, he noted that “the subsidiary values ... are not synonyms but rather hint at the [core] value.” Rather than attempt definitions for each of the three values, which might constrain their use, we leave their meaning as a cluster of associations, to be realized in the influences and future actions to which they are applied.

Validation:

The three values were validated in two ways in April-May, 2015:

1. Rev. Barbara Gadon delivered three sermons to the congregation, one on each value:
  - April 12, “The Value of Breathing: Inspiration”: Reminded that the biblical creation story tells of Yahweh’s spirit (*Ruach*, breath) hovering over the deep, and later forming humans by breathing into them, she asked “What breathes into us when we are in welter and waste?” In yoga, breathing turns the attention inward, stops the attempt to be in control. Citing the experience of black South Africans during apartheid, inspiration can happen to a group of people, turning cynicism into hope, working for the day when liberation is achieved. In church we come together to not be numb, to not give up on love and hope, but to be inspired to act on our values.
  - April 26, “The Value of Touch: Connection”: We develop a “rind” around our hearts through our schooling and work life. Our culture teaches us to keep our feelings and problems to ourselves. Valuing connection challenges us to share our feelings with each other in our church community, by asking each other how we are and by answering honestly. This will not be easy, connecting with each other, but it is essential if we are to be open to those who have been wounded. We must practice revealing ourselves to one another.
  - May 3, “The Value of Heart: Compassion”: Although brain studies show we are hard-wired for empathy (the ability to feel other people’s feelings), there are large individual differences in people’s capacity for empathy. Compassion can also be blocked by fear or anger. The biblical story of Joseph and his brothers shows Joseph able to turn away from revenge and to act compassionately for his family in their time of starvation. Churches are good at helping people expand recognition of other people as kin, as family. In the 1980s and ‘90s UU churches recognized people with AIDS as family, worthy of compassion. Now we are called to recognize people of other races as our family, to recognize their suffering and pain and humiliation, and to practice compassion toward them.
2. The Core Team elicited feedback from the congregation about the three core values in Adam’s Hall over several Sundays. Most participants had no suggested changes. One congregant stressed the key role of awe and gratitude in the religious experience. While awe is among the words associated with inspiration, gratitude, while being identified as one of the characteristics of the holy, did not occur often enough to be promoted.
3. During this same period, Cindy Lau led the Board and Lead Minister through an exercise to capture the sensations, emotions, images, and thoughts they associated with each value. Results follow:

Value	Sensations, Emotions, Images
Inspiration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• With the rising of energy in the spine, a breath is taken to renew the entire self</li><li>• A sense of joy and uplifting peace leads one to know where to go and what to do, with purpose and understanding, and which pulls</li></ul>

	<p>us out of the mundane into the sacred</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Image: rays coming through the clouds, or up from behind a mountain</li> </ul>
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breathing in the same breath with an open heart</li> <li>• Living, growing, thriving through interdependence, creating a sense of belonging, comfort, and warmth, and the knowledge that I am more than myself</li> <li>• Joined hands, Celtic knot, interlocking chain</li> </ul>
Compassion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The warmth and softening of the heart opens to the impulse to reach out and move towards.</li> <li>• A deep expression of love, informed by a sense of caring and connection, is beyond judgement to inform action taken</li> <li>• Image: big hug, extended hand</li> </ul>

Amplification:

Without straying into the work that lies ahead, the core values (and their cluster of associated words) can be scrutinized and teased for additional insights, as well as amplified for better use in formulating the mission, vision and ends.

1. Continuity and Change Since 2011: The Appreciative Inquiry Summary Report lists thirty-two value candidates. The three new value clusters contain twenty-five words. Comparison results are as follows:
  - Eleven words (or synonyms) appear on both lists: interconnectedness (inter/connection), awe, community, openness (open to mystery), diversity (inclusiveness) love, compassion, self-awareness (mindfulness), inspiration, service and generosity.
  - Values that appeared in 2011 that did not re-appear in 2015 are: reverence, freedom, appreciation, acceptance, beauty, empowerment, family, commitment, awareness, growth, presence, unity, transformative, searching, empathy, uniqueness, amazement, engagement, respect, reciprocity, and authenticity.
  - New values that appeared 2015 are: gifts of spirit, hope, courage, belonging, shared experience, safety, friendship, goodness, selflessness, caring action, and outreach.

The differences between the two lists may be largely due to the different processes used in 2010-11 than in 2015; however, the overlapping values signify a strong continuity across time and process.

2. Our Values Within, Among and Beyond: The Appreciative Inquiry Summary Report separated the values into those that define Eliot (our identity) vs. those that support our initiatives. An assumption of the current values discovery process is that experiences of the holy, and the values underlying those experiences, can occur in any of three “domains” of life: within the individual, among ourselves in the church community, and beyond us in the wider community. The table below arrays the cluster of words for each core value across these three domains. The italicized expressions were extracted from Rev. Barbara’s sermons:

	Within	Among	Beyond
Inspiration	Awe Mindfulness Open to Mystery  <i>Let go of control</i>	Gifts of spirit	Hope Courage  <i>Sustain action for liberty (So. Africa)</i>
Connection	Interconnection  <i>Practice revealing yourself</i>	Belonging Shared Experience Inclusiveness Safety Friendship <i>Make holy space where hearts are opened</i>	Community  <i>Discomfort the comfortable</i>
Compassion	Humility Love (of self)  <i>"Free from bonds that bind the mind"</i>	Generosity Goodness Selflessness Love (of neighbors)  <i>Recognize the suffering of others</i>	Caring Action Outreach Service Love (of strangers)  <i>Kinship with oppressed races</i>

One guiding principle of our religious life is that we work to promote the values we treasure among ourselves into the wider community beyond us. In so doing, values that appear in the “among” column become manifest in the “beyond” column. What does generosity and selflessness look like in the wider community? What does belonging or inclusiveness (or for that matter, safety) look like in the wider community?

Closing:

Spirit of Life, Source of Meaning, Our Ultimate Concern:  
 May we be inspired to work to promote what we value in the world.  
 May we deeply connect to those both like and unlike us.  
 May we have compassion on those who suffer and work urgently to alleviate suffering.  
 Amen

Credits:

Facilitators: Elena Bowland, Louise Bradshaw, Karen Gender, Cindy Lau, Steve Mennerick  
 Graphics: Terri Burton  
 Logistics: Mecs Stanfield  
 Core Team: Cindy Lau, Ted Lau, Steve Mennerick



## ATTACHMENT B: CURATED VALUE WORDS

### **Inspiration**

Inspiration  
Awe  
Mindfulness  
Openness to mystery  
Discovery  
Gifts of spirit  
Courage  
Hope

### **Compassion**

Caring action  
Love  
Outreach  
Service  
Compassion  
Generosity  
Selflessness  
Humility  
Goodness

### **Connection**

Community  
Inclusiveness  
Belonging  
Connection  
Interconnection  
Shared experience  
Friendship  
Safety

Note: value words within each grouping are listed in decreasing order of appearance during the discovery process.

## ATTACHMENT C: YOUTH VALUES

Unconditional love

Empowerment

Relationships

Acceptance in Community

Care

Forgiveness