READING FOR THE FIRST SESSION

Religion is that core of ultimate meanings, values, and convictions out of which we live our lives. More than mere beliefs, which are intellectual constructs, religion is an existential construct that permeates the total life of the self.

Theology is the intellectual process of analyzing, clarifying, criticizing, articulating, and symbolizing those values, meanings, and convictions that grow out of experience. In this sense, everyone is a theologian.

Religious education is the cradle-to-grave process by which we grow our theology. The diagram on page xv is based on the developmental approach to human growth. All humanity must pass through essential developmental stages to become mature beings. To become mature religious people, we must also pass through developmental tasks, which are undertaken all the time and not necessarily in any particular order. These developmental stages are: discerning human nature (including one's own nature); coming to terms with one's relationship with Ultimate Reality (by whatever name we call it); defining one's place in the historical process; developing an ethical stance with regard to one's relations to others and the natural world; and creating a meaning or meanings that provide purpose for the human endeavor.

Each of these tasks helps give birth to one's religious philosophy. The essential thing is not so much how one labels these values (for example, whether one uses the term "God" or not), but that these values be understood and made real in the life of the person. This program is largely built on undertaking these tasks.

Human Nature

This theological model has its roots in anthropology; it is rooted in human experience, the result of the tough and tender experiences of life. It was not invented out of whole cloth by academics to confuse lay people. It emerged from people who tried to make some sense out of the world in which they lived.

Historically, Unitarianism and Universalism emerged from a more optimistic view of human nature than was prevalent in orthodox Christianity. We tend to think of human nature not in terms of original sin, but in Episcopal priest Matthew Fox's term, "original blessedness." Have we gone too far? Are we overly optimistic? Perhaps we should think in terms of finite freedom as an accurate understanding of our human nature, finite creatures who err but are free to grow. This basic understanding of our own human nature is our theological starting point. The selves that we are have transactions with various realities. In those transactions we build our theology.

Ultimate Reality

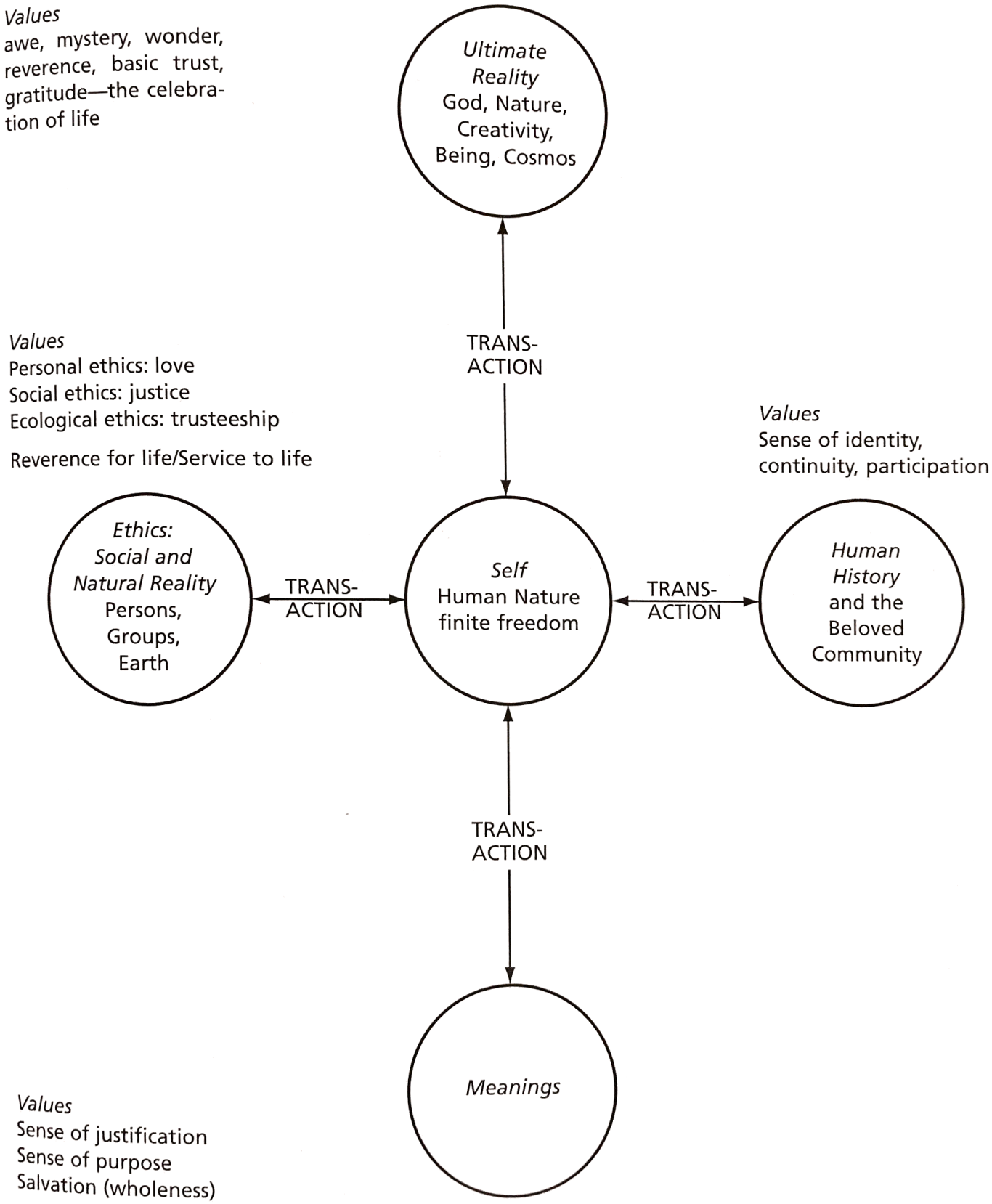
People exist in a cosmic setting. Human nature has its ultimate ground. We live in a spiritual environment. We are integral parts of this cosmic creativity, co-creators with it. There is an old quip of unknown origin that says, "the creed of the English is that there is no God and it is wise to pray to him from time to time."

The question of the nature of God or Ultimate Reality is an open one for us. We know we are part of a cosmic reality greater than ourselves, but we are hard put to name it. For some it is God, for others Nature, or Cosmos, or Creativity, or Being Itself. Some believe that to name it is to diminish it. From the transaction between ourselves and that Ultimate Reality comes values—awe, mystery, wonder, reverence, basic trust, gratitude—and we are moved to a celebration of life.

History as the "For Instances" of Theology

Western religion is linear, it is historical in nature. Theology grows out of the historical experiences of people and groups. More traditional faiths affirm an eschatology in which God finally intervenes to end human history. Many Unitarian Universalists would affirm a kind of "horizontal transcendence," looking to no God either within or beyond history as

A LIBERAL RELIGIOUS THEOLOGICAL MODEL



a point of reference. Others would see God operating with humanity in history.

One possible point of reference is the Beloved Community of Earth, a vision that transcends our meager efforts, a goal that extends beyond our lifetime, a concept so noble we do not confuse any reality with that ideal, a goal that commands our allegiance. At the same time we are biological creatures, products of a vast evolutionary process that has given us self-consciousness. Are we the goal of evolution, or merely a step along the way? We need a frame of reference that is truly transcendent to our individual lives. From this kind of understanding we derive a sense of identity as part of a biological and historical reality greater than ourselves, a feeling of continuity with a cosmic process and a sense of participation—that we have a role to play in the unfolding future.

Ethics as Meeting Unenforceable Obligations

From this sweeping historical vision we are obliged to consider our relationships, not with history as an abstraction, but with the flesh and blood people with whom we live and work day to day. Ethics are as correspondent Rushworth Kidder puts it, "unenforceable obligations." If "laws are the wise restraints that make us free," as educator James Conant says, then ethics are those inner imperatives that prompt us to care when we need not do so, to act when it may be controversial, to serve when we would rather indulge ourselves. The true test of character is to act when doing so will not do us any personal good—the importance of being good for nothing.

Our ethical responsibility, however, is not merely to the individuals we meet in daily living where love is the supreme value. We have obligations to the larger group, to national and racial and economic groups, and ultimately to the world community. Justice is love distributed, a central concept in how humanity orders its communities. And now with our understanding of global ecology, we realize our moral responsibility to the earth itself and all its creatures. A sense of trusteeship is required if we are to keep faith with the environment in which we are privileged to live.

We Are the Meaning Makers

A final and critical dimension of this theological stance has to do with human meaning. The questions "Why?" and "So what?" continue to haunt us. While there are many ways of exploring human meaning, Viktor Frankl's model in *Man's Search for Meaning,* is instructive. He suggests three sources of meaning: the intrinsic worth of human experiences of love and beauty; serving a cause greater than oneself, whether by raising a loving family, creating a great work of art, or committing oneself to some great social cause; and discovering meaning in human suffering—finding significance in the hurts of human life—physical and spiritual.

Theologians have argued that we are justified—saved—by faith, by works, by character. What does justify our existence in the short years allotted to us? What is the purpose of humankind? What are our purposes? Do we really want to be saved? If not in the traditional sense, then in the original sense of the word—health and wholeness.

We Are the Theologians

As theologians, we are the measurers of all things theological. By our very nature we are the ultimate seat of authority in religion. Take the Abraham and Isaac story in the Hebrew Scriptures. Abraham was commanded to take Isaac into the wilderness and slay him as a sacrifice. At the last moment a voice intervened and ordered Abraham to stay his hand. How does Abraham know if the voice is that of Yahweh or of Moloch, god of death? To make that decision Abraham must decide the source of the command. Only he can make that decision.

No, only *we* can make that decision. We are the meaning makers. We are co-creators of meanings, values, convictions. We live in a community of co-creators. The creation of a liberal theology needs to address these basic religious questions, which are developmental tasks along the life span: human nature, the nature of ultimate reality, our role in history and evolution, our ethical behavior, and the meanings we create for our lives.

READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

At gatherings of Unitarian Universalist ministers, one person is usually asked to present an odyssey—a life story. Sharing a spiritual odyssey seems a tad pretentious. It is like repeatedly asking yourself, "Who am I?" Relating a spiritual odyssey involves making critical choices: what to include, how much time to spend on this or that, what transforming and frustrating experiences to share, what influential people to name. The essential must be separated from the non-essential, which is a working definition of the word "spiritual."

There is no unanimity on what "spiritual" means. It can be anything from a "warm tingle in the toes," to ecstatic religious experience, to being "born again." By these definitions, there is clearly a felt need for something more than the thin gruel of rationalism that has no heart, for something more than a culture in the grip of technocracy where things predominate and objectivity prevails.

There are times when spirituality seems like just a fad. How often are ministers admonished to "say something spiritual," as if one could flick a switch and do it. One veteran Unitarian Universalist minister and trend observer said that spirituality "could be the fattest cow currently waddling through our pasture."

Stereotypes suggest that in order to be spiritual, one must be a monk, or someone who walks through life on air, or someone engaged in disciplined spiritual practice and goes on retreats to monasteries. But spirituality infuses each of us. It is not restricted to an enlightened few. We may even be spiritual without knowing it. Take the cartoon of two meditators sitting together. The Master, with profound wrinkles on his brow, says to the student, who looks a bit uncertain, "Nothing happens next. This is it."

We know there is something more to life than the material—some reality beneath the surface of passing events. I delight in Woody Allen's response to the question of whether one can see the human soul under a microscope, "Maybe, but you'd definitely need one of those good ones with two eyepieces." Getting a handle on this elusive matter of spirituality is something like trying to untie a wet knot while wearing boxing gloves, to borrow an image from the late novelist Peter De Vries. Another of De Vries's characters finds the "atmosphere of philosophy so rarified that he keeps swallowing as he reads in order to pop his ears."

In *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham cite a Jewish Hassidic tale: "When the disciples of Baal Shem Tov asked him how to know whether a celebrated scholar whom they proposed to visit was a true zaddik [teacher], he answered: 'Ask him to advise you what to do to keep unholy thoughts from disturbing you in your prayers and studies. If he gives you advice, then you will know that he belongs to those who are of no account.'" The best medicine is found when doctors learn their patients' conditions and resources and realize that patients often can heal themselves. This is even more true for spirituality than medicine.

I suggest a periodic spiritual check-up, consisting more of stories than of facts, more of questions than of answers. Diagnosis and prescription will not be high-tech. Pablo Picasso once said, "Computers are useless; they can only give you answers." Spirituality is more art than science. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that "Life is painting a picture, not doing a sum."

Learning to ask the right questions is crucial. I think of a cartoon that aptly sums up our dilemma: Pictured is a large and impressive building, The Research Institute, with two signs at the entrance, pointing in opposite directions. In one direction is "unanswered questions" and in the other "unquestioned answers." I make the assumption here that, in the words of Kurtz and Ketcham, "Spirituality is a lot like health; we may have good health or poor health, but it's something we can't avoid having. The same is true of spirituality: every human being is a

spiritual being. The question is not whether we 'have spirituality' but whether the spirituality we have is a negative one that leads to isolation and self-destruction or one that is more positive and life-giving."

How are you feeling spiritually? When you get out of bed in the morning, are you glad to be alive? Or are you like one of Charles Schultz's *Peanuts'* characters who "dread[s] one day at a time"? When you go to bed at night, is it with relief that the day is over, or do you give thanks for yet another day of living? The capacity to have zest in living is a key spiritual health indicator. Enthusiasm derives from the Greek, an "extravagant religious emotion," literally being "possessed by a god."

In her "spiritual geography" *Dakota*, Kathleen Norris wrote the following about gossip in the small towns of the Dakota plains:

> My favorite gossip takes note of the worst and the best that is in us. Two women I know were diagnosed with terminal cancer. One said, "If I ever get out of this hospital, I'm going to look out for Number One." And that's exactly what she did. Against overwhelming odds, she survived, and it made her mean. The other woman spoke about the blessings of a life that had taken some hard blows: her mother had killed herself when she was a girl, her husband had died young. I happened to visit her just after she'd been told that she had less than a year to live. She was dry-eyed, and had been reading the Psalms. She was entirely realistic about her illness and said to me, "The one thing that scares me is the pain. I hope I die before I turn into an old bitch." I told her family that story after the funeral, and they loved it; they could hear in it their mother's voice, the way she really was.

One's attitude in facing each day is indicative of spiritual health or illness. As poet Stephen Dunn wrote, "To have any chance at a good life—a friend once said in a letter—you have to keep saying abracadabra even though nothing happens." Do we have a healthy sense of humor about ourselves and the contradictions, the paradoxes, and the oxymorons of life? When in doubt, can we laugh at life?

In recalling her early life on the prairie, Kathleen Norris notes her fundamentalist upbringing and the "Monster God." "My uncle told me once about having his mother sit at the edge of his bed and tell him that Jesus might come as a thief in the night and tomorrow could be that great day when the world ends. 'That sucks when you'd been planning a ball game and a rubber gun battle,' he said. He would pull the covers over his head when she left, and try to shut out the sounds of Jesus sneaking around in the dark." If we take ourselves too seriously, our spiritual health is found wanting.

Can we deal with the inevitable tragedies of life, including death, including our own? Mary Catherine Bateson tells of her life with parents Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson and how they chose to die. Both died of cancer. "Though she had always insisted that life should include an acknowledgment of death, Margaret refused, in the face of incontrovertible evidence, to admit she was dying and engaged a 'healer' to treat her. Gregory died a planned death, surrounded by Zen students meditating day and night." A reviewer of Bateson's memoir concluded that "When the time came, neither of these world-famous scientists, it seems, found knowledge or rationality much help in facing the unknown." It is not only how we live our life, but how we face our death, that is an indicator of spiritual health. Religion prepares us for the worst, as well as the best, that life offers.

Do we manifest our spirituality in the world so that people take inspiration from who and what we are? One member of an adult religious education class in "Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography" wrote that spirituality is "the deepest inner core of my being; the source of inner strength, of endurance, of meaning, of awe; the life force that keeps me wanting to grow, to learn, to create, to change, to relate, and to love; my own unique bit of DNA, that at the same time connects me to the Life Force of

the entire universe; that stores up inspiration from nature, from all kinds of other people, and from all kinds of art forms; and that helps me to get through the hard things."

Does our faith overflow into service? In *Dakota*, Kathleen Norris gives a poignant and moving account of her little church on the plains, Hope Church, Presbyterian, where she served as occasional lay preacher: "Hope Church gives the people who live around it a sense of identity. Hope is well cared for. Both the outhouse and the sanctuary are freshly painted. As one pastor recently put it, 'the thing that makes Hope so vibrant is that the congregation is so alive to the world.'" They conducted a study of the politics of hunger. In recent hard times, while Hope's membership declined by nearly half, the amount the church donated for mission increased every year. It now ranks near the top in per capita giving among Presbyterian churches in the state of South Dakota. According to Norris, "One former pastor said, 'It can be astonishing how tiny Hope Church makes you feel so strongly that you're part of a global entity.'" Vibrant spirituality and social responsibility are a seamless web in which our gratitude for being overflows into service.

Does our spirituality lift us and our lives into larger frameworks of meaning so that we see our life as a worthy project, so that we take joy in the work of our hands and heart? In his book *Tales of the Hasidim,* Martin Buber tells us that "[F]or thirty-five years Paul Cezanne lived in obscurity, producing masterpieces that he gave away to unsuspecting neighbors. So great was his love for his work that he never gave a thought to achieving recognition, nor did he suspect that someday he would be looked upon as the father of modern painting." Cezanne owes his first fame to a Paris dealer who chanced upon his paintings, put some of them together, and presented the world of art with the first Cezanne exhibition. The world was astonished to discover the presence of a master. "The master was just as astonished. Shortly after the exhibition opened, Cezanne, arriving at the gallery leaning on the arm of his son, could not contain his amazement when he saw his paintings on display. Turning to his son he exclaimed, 'Look, they have framed them!'" We all need to have the work of our lives framed in some larger context than the everyday. That is spiritual health.

Does our spiritual health enable us to celebrate life? I am captivated by the image of Joseph Campbell ringing the great bronze bell at Chartres, an experience he described in *The Power of Myth.*

> So we climbed the tower up to the great bronze bell. There was a little platform like a seesaw. He stood on one end of the seesaw, and I stood on the other end of the seesaw, and there was a little bar there for us to hold on to. He gave the thing a push, and then he was on it, and I was on it. And we started going up and down, and the wind was blowing through our hair, up there in the cathedral, and then it began ringing underneath us—bong, bong, bong. It was one of the most thrilling adventures of my life. That was a moving, beautiful thing. I've been to Chartres time and time again since.

The opportunity to write a spiritual autobiography is an opportunity for a spiritual checkup that ought not to be missed. It is essential for our health and well-being.

Background Reading

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WORKSHEET 1

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING YOUR SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Your religious life story is your own; no one can tell you how to present it. Because narrative is such a central part of the religious quest, here are some guidelines that might help you tell your own spiritual autobiography. While it is possible to share your story from notes, the greatest benefit will come if you write it in full.

Time Line

Draw a horizontal line on a piece of paper. At the left margin make a dot and write the date of your birth; at the right margin make another dot and write the date you expect to die (a reasonable estimate); along the line make a third dot and write the current date. How do you feel about this?

Life Functions in Space

Identify the places in which significant things have happened to you. We might call this process mapping the spirit.

All Life Is Meeting Others

Who are the three or four people who have had the greatest impact on your life? Why?

Experiences Shape Our Religious Faith

What were two or three formative experiences in your life? Why are they important to you? Some of these experiences we choose to call religious.

We Live in Communities

Which communities, religious or not, have had a lasting influence on your development?

We Are Choosing Creatures

Think of the important decisions in your life. Discuss what they meant to you, how they were made, and the results.

Life Is Made of Joy and Sorrow

List a few of the happiest and saddest experiences of your life.

A Master Story

Each of us has a "master story," a theme that summarizes our life endeavor. See if you can discern your master story. What might be a theme for your life thus far? Reflect on your odyssey and discern any theological values that have informed you.