



Photo: Fabian Jones/Unsplash

**The Practice of
Discerning Truth
Meaning Making Project Feb 2026**

Meeting this Moment with Love & Justice

WELCOME

“Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.”

Scottish novelist Walter Scott wrote these words over two hundred years ago, and they resonate deep in my heart today. My head often feels full of tangles as I try to discern truth from manipulation, facts from disinformation, which is this month's much needed practice! We are faced with endless amounts of content these days, all designed to catch our attention and tell a particular narrative or promote untruths. In the midst of these tangled webs I find it a challenge to discern truth or even accurate facts.

Facts are objective truths, which can be experienced or proven, such as the earth revolves around the sun. Truths, however, can be factual, but they can also be beliefs or values, which complicates our UU search for truth and meaning (our fourth principle). What is true for me may not be true for you. It depends on identity, culture, knowledge, lived experience, and values. We know this as Unitarian Universalists, we embrace the multiplicity of truth, we encourage people to seek their own truths, their own beliefs. Part of the work of discerning truth is to distinguish between objective facts and our moral and personal truths.

Unfortunately, these days objective facts are also under attack - from certain politicians and news outlets and corporations and Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated fakery. Facts like trans people have always existed, that climate change is real and a consequence of human activity, that vaccines are effective at disease mitigation. It is hard to find common ground when facts become subjective!

One way I manage my response to the tangled web we live in is to return to my own core values and sense of integrity, to find my thread and follow it through the tangles. Focusing on what matters to me, by advocating for those issues, and holding to my sense of truth helps keep me grounded. I don't mean that I am a pillar of perfection (that will never happen!) but that I try to take seriously my values, to live truthfully in the world by directing and re-directing my energy to the people and things I cherish. Living your values is a way to live your truth. Following your thread helps you through the tangles.

Blessings,

fiona

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The Practice of Discerning Truth

- How do you find your center or grounding when you are feeling overwhelmed or confused by media content?
- What does “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” look like today?
- How do you determine what is trustworthy? What are the steps or strategies you use to determine whether a source is trustworthy?
- Have you had the experience of seeing a photo or watching a video and later discovering that it was created by AI? How did that feel? What (if anything) did you do about it?
- How are you responding to Artificial Intelligence uses and AI created content? Do you have concerns?
- How do you respond when people don't accept the truth of your experience?
- Have there been times when it was difficult for you to accept a perspective or truth you haven't seen or heard before?
- How do you deal with your own impulse to double down when called out? How do you hold compassion for people who you believe are wrong?
- What do you do when people you care about send you videos that you believe to be misinformation?
- How do you stay in a caring relationship with people who believe disinformation?
- Have you enjoyably learned something on the internet that you often use? Why was it so helpful to you? What do you appreciate about the source?
- Where do you look for balanced reporting that allows you to find the truth in a subject you are concerned with? What makes this source trustworthy?
- What do you think about William James's version of how to know truth, (practicality) and Protagoras's version, (we are the measure of truth)? [a topic addressed in the sermon]

QUOTES

If you're going to speak truth to power, make sure it's the truth.

Margaret Atwood 🍁

What stories can we be better at telling that replace the socialism of fools with the socialism of facts? I do think that we can do that better.

Naomi Klein 🍁

Stopping misinformation requires a coordinated push from every corner of society: researchers, policy makers, educators. No single fix will do it. But we can hold the line. We don't have to let the lies take over.

Timothy Caulfield 🍁

Stories allow us to see many aspects of truth, including the truth of what our own personal outlooks cannot see.

Rev. Lynn Harrison, UU 🍁

Being outraged, re-tweeting an article or speaker that made you mad has nothing to do with truth, it only reflects our reactivity.

Rev. Wayne Walder, UU 🍁

The next time you wonder what is true not only on the internet but in your day to day lives, start with "is it practical, does it work?" Then go to "who or what is the measure of truth here."

Rev. Wayne Walder, UU 🍁

We declare that there are many paths to the sacred. We hold fast to the notion that one religion does not hold all the truth for all time, not even Unitarian Universalism. We maintain that a free, open, and respectful dialogue is one of the primary ways our theological perspectives evolve and grow.

Rev. Dr. Sheri Prud'homme, UU

From "[Theological Reflection on the Proposed Revision to Article II](#)" (PDF, 9 pages), as quoted on the UUA's Worship Web (used with author's permission)

The ability to hold two truths that may seem contradictory is still a superpower. Doing so allows us to comprehend that no single truth exists and that it is within the intersections of many that we often find the most intriguing glimmerings of truth. This era of false news, in which a few pixels can create supposed truths the way fairytales made gold from straw, means that we have to understand that something can be simultaneously objectively false and also very convincing and motivating for people who believe it.

Rev. Leslie Takahashi, UU

From her reflection "Beyond the Both/And" in Linnea Nelson, *Beyond Welcome: Building Communities of Love* (2021, p. 50). Kindle Edition. (used with author's permission)

QUOTES - 2

Wild longing in my eyes,
I searched for myself
whole days and nights.
Until the Truthful One
found me, right here at home.
Mary Ford-Grabowksy

“Truth is so rare that it is delightful to
tell it.” Emily Dickinson
Truth is a tendency.
R. Buckminster Fuller

The firmest and noblest ground on which
people can live is truth.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Art can reveal truths that are hidden or
denied. The inconvenient truths, the ugly
truths, the inspiring truths. This is
essential when the public discourse is
vandalized by lies, and the public is
speechless with horror – or busy with
golf or trying desperately to live in an
increasingly cruel world.... Art can
represent the facts in a way that we can
bear to see them – just as Perseus was
able to slay Medusa by looking at her
reflection in his magic shield. Art can be
our magic shield, representing truths in
ways that open our hearts without
breaking them utterly.
Kathleen Dean Moore

We all need to connect better in person
or at least remember what we know
about people. How do we connect in a
way where we're not so vulnerable to lies
about one another?
Laura Flanders

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –
Emily Dickinson

Truth is so rare that it is delightful to
tell it. Emily Dickinson

Truth is a deep kindness that teaches
us to be content in our everyday life
and share with the people the same
happiness. Khalil Gibran

If you do not tell the truth about
yourself, you cannot tell it about other
people. Virginia Woolf

Discernment gives you the ability to
both appreciate the subtle beauty of a
Renoir and spot a fake.
Hannah Anderson

A lie is halfway round the world before
the truth has got its boots on. Anon

The truth is rarely pure and never
simple. Oscar Wilde

In a time of deceit telling the truth is a
revolutionary act. George Orwell

Rather than love, than money, than
fame, give me truth.
Henry David Thoreau

QUOTES - 3

“Truth," said a traveller,
“Is a rock, a mighty fortress;
“Often have I been to it,
“Even to its highest tower,
“From whence the world looks black.”
“Truth," said a traveller,
“Is a breath, a wind,
“A shadow, a phantom;
“Long have I pursued it,
“But never have I touched
“The hem of its garment.”
And I believed the second traveller;
For truth was to me
A breath, a wind,
A shadow, a phantom,
And never had I touched
The hem of its garment.
Stephen Crane

The first stanza of
“A Brave and Startling Truth”
by Maya Angelou

We, this people, on a small and lonely
planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of
indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we
learn
A brave and startling truth

Read the full poem here:
<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-brave-and-startling-truth/>

I grew up in the Anglican Church, but the ‘sin and salvation’ side of Christianity never resonated with me. At school I became fascinated by the different approaches of world religions to ‘the big questions’ and decided to study Theology and Religious Studies at university. The more I studied world religions, the more I understood them as human constructs, which left me disillusioned with the idea of finding the ‘truth’.

I now realise that trying to discern the ‘truth’ of one religion from another is a false endeavour, truth is subjective. What is important is thinking about what is true for us and living in accordance with that truth. My truth, ‘appreciation of the interconnected web of being,’ leads me to tread lightly on the earth by trying to live as sustainably as possible and to follow the ‘golden rule’, treating others with respect and compassion.

My understanding of Unitarian spirituality is the search for what gives our lives truth and meaning, in loving relationship with each other, and the fostering of deep connection – to each other and to the divine, which is in everything.

What is your truth?

Rev. Laura Dobson, UU, England

<https://worshipwords.unitarian.org.uk/truth/> (used with author’s permission)

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES



Photo: Pixabay/Pexels

Taking Care of Feelings

One of the challenges of living in a time of increasing polarization is finding oneself in gatherings – family, friends, church – where there are people who have radically different understandings of what is happening. It's easy to end up in a heated conversation. Or silent frustration. Taking care of our own feelings is so important.

If you find yourself filled with strong, uncomfortable feelings, try Brother Brother Phap Linh's meditation "taking care of feelings." This short (11 minute +) meditation is available for free on the Plum Village app website: go to plumvillage.app and scroll down towards the bottom of the site. The app itself is also free, and highly recommended.

Discerning what's true for you

It can be a challenge to determine the most "true" -- as in "right" or "correct" -- course of action in a personal situation.

Psychotherapist James Hollis recommends this test. Ask yourself, does this choice expand me or diminish me? Or put another way, does this choice move me closer to living my values or move me further from them?

Such ongoing discernment can enable us to live with integrity and authenticity.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES - 2

On Myth and Truth

Myths convey truths about universal human experiences (life, death, love...) by using symbols and metaphors. They are not literal facts (not historically accurate, for example) yet they offer truthful insights about the human journey, and they do so in memorable and often entertaining ways. Myths in religion, folklore and storytelling can be embraced for the truth and wisdom they hold, without requiring them to be factually correct.

When you are in need of some truth, read a myth! Take some time after to reflect on what truth you found within it. Journaling or drawing may help you find insights.

In community

Three Truths and a Lie

This game allows a group to reflect on honesty and deception, in a fun and community-building way. Each person presents four “little-known facts” about their life story, but only one actually happened. The other players guess which of the “facts” is actually true. The results are often funny and surprising!



Photo: McCutcheon/Pexels

IN FOCUS #1

Critical Thinking about Media Content

With all the disinformation and misinformation and AI fakes out there it helps to remember we have tools to discern reliable sources. Consider holding an after service session or an on-line meeting about critical thinking and media. Begin with a conversation about how people are coping with media content concerns. After a listening time, share strategies for critique, including these options.

Pause and Reflect

Conspiracies and inflammatory content often play on emotions like fear, anger, or outrage. When you find yourself reacting strongly, take a pause and a deep breath. Pay attention to what is upsetting you and let yourself feel - then keep breathing until the feeling loosens.

Identify the Source

Check the author, publisher, or organization behind the content. How do they benefit from the ideas they are promoting? Does their experience or identity connect them to the content? Reliable sources will provide transparency about their credentials and intentions.

Follow the Evidence

Use fact-checking websites to confirm the information. Try [Fact Check](#) or look at [CP24's fact files](#), [Snopes](#) or the UK's [Full Fact site](#). Check to see if the image or story is AI generated. Look for primary sources and professional peer reviewed journals.

Consider Context and Verify

Look at other information from the same source. What is the overall reliability, tone or perspective? Look for the same story/ information from other sources, especially ones you already trust. If you can't find it anywhere except in a social media post, chances are it's misinformation.

Check for Logical Fallacies

Learn to recognize common logical fallacies like ad hominem (attacking the person, not the argument) or straw man (misrepresenting the argument to refute it) or false dilemmas (if you support this you must also support that).

IN FOCUS #2

Truth, Reconciliation & Discernment

“May we all find the strength, warmth, and support to be able to speak our truths.”
Garnet Angeconeb, Speaking My Truth: Reflections on Reconciliation and Residential Schools, Selected Readings, 2012

"Sitting in corners wringing hands and wondering what to do is not going to advance anything, including yourself. Read the calls to action, and as you go through them one at a time ask yourself: do I belong in this call?"
Dr. Marie Wilson, Truth & Reconciliation Commissioner

Before the final Truth and Reconciliation report was released, the TRC Commissioners wrote about their definition of reconciliation and the principles that are necessary components of any reconciliation efforts. Principle #3 is “Reconciliation is a process of healing of relationships that requires public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration that acknowledge and redress past harms.” Truth sharing was a central part of the TRC’s work. Survivors told their stories in the open and in closed sessions. Many travelled far to attend the Commission and many told stories that they had never shared before. The Commission listened carefully, honoured those who came, and wrote about what they learned, sharing their report in a multi-volume report that included 94 calls to action.

The publication of the calls to action is meant to be the beginning of the work, not the end. Principles 4 and 5 talk about the need to address the ongoing legacy of colonialism and to close the gap in social, economic and health outcomes. This is not (only) the work of the government. This work belongs to all who live in what is now called Canada: Principle #6 says that “All Canadians, as Treaty peoples, share responsibility for establishing and maintaining mutually respectful relationships.” Once the truth has been discerned, then we must all adjust our understandings of how Canada came to be and who we are as a society.

"It's time for the rest of us Canadians to understand these stories and understand what it means to be a Canadian. Because I do believe, since the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and then the apology of the Prime Minister, that Canadians are experiencing a sort of existential crisis—who are we? What is this country? We've been told who we are and it doesn't fit with these descriptors."

**Kathleen Mahoney, Chief Negotiator, Residential schools settlement
Banff Centre Truth and Reconciliation Summit Speaker**

<https://www.banffcentre.ca/articles/truth-and-reconciliation-summit-quotes>

IN FOCUS #3

Truth and Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence, or AI, is all over the news, on TV, in films, and the subject of print and online essays and articles. It is transforming work and research and play. It is another industrial revolution, creating a big shift in white collar work in particular. For every person writing about the positive potential of AI, there is someone else raising an alarm. With AI becoming ever more unavoidable, now is the time to ask questions about it's utility, use of resources, and whether we are allowing our minds to be colonized by AI.

In this time, at the beginning of our relationship with Artificial Intelligence, one of our most useful technologies is one of our oldest: our awareness of our own body. There is a feeling in the body when we encounter something strange. Whether the strangeness is a result of difference, or perhaps even more disconcerting, when there is strangeness in unexpected similarities. When difference is expected but not found. This feeling of strangeness is a marker — a flag. It lets us know that our brain is not sure if we are encountering friend or foe, safety or danger. It is a finger poking us, a kinaesthetic alert telling us to pay attention. I invite you to use this felt sense of your body. Notice what your body flags as strange or weird. Sit with it. Play with it. Pay attention to it.



Photo: ShaneKell/Pexels

As well as paying attention to your body's response, engage your critical thinking skills when watching video content or interacting with chatbots. Do bears really play on trampolines in suburban backyards? (I watched videos of animals on trampolines a few times before realizing they were AI generated.)

AI chatbot Grok says Elon Musk is a better role model for people today than Jesus. It is no surprise to learn Grok was created by Elon Musk's company. How can we become better aware of AI's bias and prejudices?

IN FOCUS

Truth and Artificial Intelligence - 2

A machine that learns based on data is heavily influenced by that data. Autonomous cars that looked exclusively at white people during their training were less successful recognizing black pedestrians. Chat GPT learns from the internet and the internet is filled with biases, including racism. Ethical companies trying to mitigate racism have had difficulty or at least weird results trying to put a human rights lens on the responses. Programs are also influenced by their intended purpose. Artist and technologist James Bridle lives in Greece, where AI is being used to identify sites for fracking — this is something that AI is very good at. AI is expensive to develop. The big sources of funding for AI are primarily oil and gas companies. Bridle worries that this will shape the kind of AI that develops. Resource extraction is based on a competitive model. As Bridle notes, competition is only one force for evolution — why wouldn't we want our AI to have a well-rounded education?

James Bridle, *Ways of Being: Animals, Plants, Machines: The Search for a Planetary Intelligence*, 2022

Considerations in AI Ethics include: ensuring transparency and explainability, promoting digital literacy, encouraging accountability, and upholding the commitment that technology should serve truth rather than distort it.

Transparency asks that AI systems operate in an open and understandable manner so that their outputs can be scrutinized and verified. Deepfakes and other forms of fabricated media illustrate how hidden, opaque algorithms can manipulate reality without accountability.

Building skills in digital literacy so people can critically evaluate digital content ensures they are less susceptible to manipulation.

Ensuring accountability makes developers, deployers, and users of AI responsible for their actions and will help to prevent misuse, particularly when AI systems manipulate or deceive.

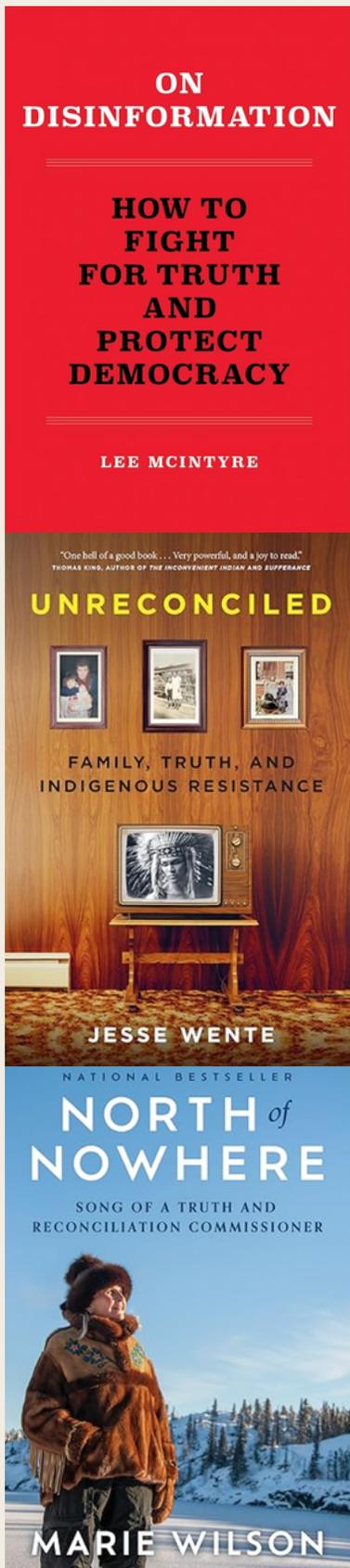
Scenarios where AI-driven social media bots have swayed public opinion or even influenced political outcomes underscore the need for clear accountability.

Finally, technology should serve to reveal and preserve the truth, not distort it.

From the CyberStrategy Institute 2025

For AI generated images and texts, [this ZDNET article provides some helpful tips for detection.](#)

THE BOOKSHELF



On Disinformation: How to Fight for Truth and Protect Democracy by Lee McIntyre 2023.

This book explores the history of how disinformation has been weaponized to manipulate society.

Foolproof: Why Misinformation Infects Our Minds and How to Build Immunity by Sander van der Linden, 2023.

Sander van der Linden explains why our brains are so vulnerable to misinformation, how it spreads across social networks, and what we can do to protect ourselves and others.

Unreconciled: Family, Truth and Indigenous Resistance by Jesse Wente 2021

Wente uncovers the lies and myths that affect relations between white and Indigenous peoples and the power of narrative to emphasize truth over comfort.

The Way of Integrity: Finding the Path to Your True Self by Martha Beck 2021

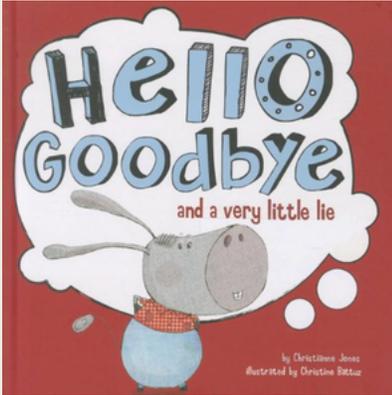
How personal integrity keeps us true to ourselves and can provide emotional healing.

North of Nowhere: Song of a Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner by Marie Wilson, 2024.

One of the featured books in Canadian UU Reads this past fall.

“Witnessing is not a spectator sport. It is full contact. It requires a commitment to engage with others. It takes presence, participation, practice and action.” (p. 291)

WITH CHILDREN



Hello Goodbye And A Very Little Lie by Christianne Jones illustrated by Christine Battuz.

The Sad Little Fact by Jonah Winter illustrated by Pete Oswald 2019.

For educators, MediaSmarts promote digital literacy with a variety of accessible resources for children, youth and parents.

This story of Guru Nanak, the first Guru of the Sikh tradition, speaks to the value of truth.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Read the CUC's statement at the TRC final gathering:

<https://cuc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CUC-Expression-of-Reconciliation.pdf>

Read indigenous authors:

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/20-books-to-read-in-honour-of-the-national-day-for-truth-and-reconciliation-1.7335838>

Living the Questions with Parker J. Palmer on Substack

<https://parkerjpalmer.substack.com/>

Lynn Harrison "Truth be Told"

An uplifting song about the importance of truth-telling in an age of

disinformation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhM12d83bUg> and

At Chapel of Song on Substack <https://harrisonlynn.substack.com/p/truth-be-told>

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives explores the political tools available to Canadians to challenge misinformation.

The Bridge is a podcast from retired CBC anchor Peter Mansbridge. In this episode he interviews academic Lee McIntyre on the rise of disinformation.

A fascinating deep dive from *The Walrus* by journalist Viviane Fairbank on the limitations of fact checking and objective truth in this current era.

Discussion Guide

Welcome

Greet everyone. If this is a drop-in group or if there are newer folks present, do a go round of names. Give a brief overview of the session, including time expectations.

Today's topic is the practice of discerning truth: how do we recognize truth in the midst of disinformation and manipulation?

Chalice Lighting

It is in the act of sharing the peaks and pits of life together we come to see life in its totality, profiting from the perspective of those with whom we share the spiritual journey. When we speak together most truthfully; when we listen intently so that we see each other and ourselves more clearly, this is (in my experience) the time that "life's great meaning breaks in sunshine on our ways"; this is how new truth comes to be known. It is the reason for me that the most precious resource in the religious community is the people of the religious community.

Rev. Mark Mosher de Wolfe

Check In

Offer a choice of these questions or one of your own:

- How goes it with your spirit?
- What's in your mind and heart today?

Covenant

If your group has become familiar with their covenant, you could ask each member to name the line that is speaking to them today.

- Speak as personally and deeply as we wish--or not. It is always okay to pass.
- Speak kindly about ourselves and others.
- Speak from our own experiences.
- Hold confidentiality. Share your experience of the conversation, not other people's stories.
- Listen respectfully. Avoid giving advice or asking probing questions about others' lives.
- Be aware of power differentials. Consider our own and others' identities and how these identities shape the impact of our contributions.
- (Include any agreements added by your group)

Discussion Guide - 2

Conversation

We have been considering what it means to seek truth, to practice discerning truth. This is an especially vital practice in this age of disinformation and manipulation. We learn to hold multiple truths as Unitarian Universalists, including uncomfortable truths, while sifting out the falsehoods constantly on offer.

Invite participants to respond to a reflection question or share their experience with a practice. You may choose to begin with a go-round or simply let the conversation flow, making sure everyone has a chance to share. If there is a lull, let the silence sit for a time, then offer up a question to continue the conversation.

Optional Starting Questions:

- How do you find your center or grounding when you are feeling overwhelmed or confused by media content?
- Have there been times when it was difficult for you to accept a perspective or truth you haven't seen or heard before?
- How do you deal with your own impulse to double down when called out? How do you hold compassion for people who you believe are wrong?

Sharing Silence

Before closing the session with the check out and chalice extinguishing, offer a minute of silence to give people a moment to process all that has been said and to share a time of quiet respite.

Leaving

What is staying with you, in your heart, mind or spirit, from today's conversation?

Closing Words

"The truth isn't always beauty, but the hunger for it is."

Nadine Gordimer

Extinguish the chalice



Photo: Randy Jacob/Unsplash

“We must keep telling the truth, keep fighting, keep building a shared story and collective power because in our bones—we know another world is possible. ... We begin with truth-telling and moving together in that truth. Another world is possible if we build it together.”

Side with Love Organizing Team,
Statement on Buffalo Shooting, 2022
(public statement by the team, used with permission)

Meaning Making Packets are created by a team of Canadian UU ministers: Arran Morton, Fiona Heath, Karen Fraser Gitlitz, & Lynn Harrison, with administrative support from Crystal Ironside. www.MeaningMakingProject.com.