

**The Practice of
Seeking Wisdom**
Meaning Making Project Mar 2026

Photo: Annie Spratt/Unsplash

Meeting this Moment with Love & Justice

WELCOME

When I think of wisdom, one of the teachings that first springs to my mind is the Buddhist story of the Second Arrow. As you may know, one of the Four Noble Truths at the heart of Buddhist teaching is the simple recognition that there is suffering (dukkha). To be alive is, inevitably, to encounter pain and difficulty. Dukkha shows up in many forms: physical pain or injury, illness and aging, birth and death, loss and disappointment, or a quieter, persistent sense of dissatisfaction with your life. No one is exempt from this. This is not a failure—it is simply part of being alive, being human.

To help us understand suffering in our minds and hearts, the Buddha offered the teaching often called the **Second Arrow**. In this story, the Buddha says that when a person is struck by an arrow (literally or metaphorically), they naturally feel the pain of the wound. This first pain—the physical or emotional hurt itself—is unavoidable. But then, almost immediately, we add something more. We react to the pain by spinning stories about what it means.

These stories tend to follow familiar patterns and often reveal our deepest fears, judgments, or beliefs about ourselves and the world. Many are directed inward: “I’m going to die,” “I’m useless now,” “I deserved this.” Others turn outward: “They did this to hurt me,” “People can’t be trusted,” “Everyone is against me.” Though they feel convincing in the moment, these stories are rarely grounded in reality. They are attempts to escape, control, or explain the pain, but instead they become a form of resistance to it. In trying to protect ourselves, we wound ourselves again. This added layer of suffering—the fear, shame, anger, despair or disconnection created by our stories—is the **second arrow**.

Sometimes, we can be struck by additional arrows. We may judge ourselves for having reacted badly, feel guilty for not being more “mindful,” or ashamed for struggling at all. In this way, third or fourth arrows can follow, compounding the hurt.

Buddhist wisdom invites us to a different response. Rather than fighting or fleeing the pain of the first arrow, we are encouraged to **lean into it**—to feel it fully and honestly, without adding a story. This means meeting our pain with compassion, tenderness, and care, including seeking medical, spiritual, or other professional support when needed. It also means gently turning toward the reality of the situation as it is, rather than the frightening stories our minds may create.

... continued

Letter, continued . . .

The first arrow, the Buddha reminds us, is unavoidable. Pain will come. Loss will come. But the second arrow—the harsh self-talk, catastrophic thinking, blame, and fear—is not inevitable. With practice, awareness, and compassion, we can learn to set it down, allowing ourselves to suffer less even during great difficulty.

Over the years, my understanding of this story has deepened. I have come to see that it applies not only to moments I label as “bad,” but also to the everyday interactions and experiences. The stories our minds create in response to what we encounter unconsciously shape how we relate to one another and to the world around us.

When I am faced with the many truths that arise from connecting with people of different identities, life experiences, religions, and cultures, I find it helpful to return to the wisdom of this teaching—especially when the truths offered challenge or differ from my own. In those moments, I try to pause and gently reflect on what is actually happening, and what may be shaped by the stories I am telling myself.

Untangling what is real from the narratives my mind creates can take patience and care. Because storytelling is one of the ways we make meaning, I try not to reject these stories outright, but to hold them with curiosity. I ask whether they arise from fear or insecurity, or love and connection. Do they draw me closer to—or further away from—my values and from the way I hope to be in the world?

As you explore wisdom in your life, community, and beyond this month, may you be free from all unnecessary arrows.

Warmly,
Arran



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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The Practice of Seeking Wisdom

- How do you seek wisdom?
- What sources do you turn to most often when you are seeking wisdom?
 - People in your life?
 - People you haven't met – elders, thinkers, writers, activists who you follow
 - Personal, spiritual, or activist ancestors
 - Spiritual writings, scripture, written traditions
 - Poetry, theatre, novels, dance and other art forms
 - Nature, the land, water, ocean, creatures/beings
 - Spirit, deities
 - Yourself, your highest self
 - Any other sources?
- Are there sources that other people in your life turn to, that are uncomfortable for you? How do you respond?
- How has life experience assisted you in growing into wisdom?
- How are you growing into wisdom? (or not?)
- In what ways would you like to become more wise?
- How do you respond when you realize that you've been unwise?
- Are there times you have felt the 'second arrow' in your life?
(Read Rev. Arran's letter, above, for an explanation of the 'second arrow.')
- What have you learned of the multiple truths that come from varied identities, life experiences, religions and cultures?
- How do you respond when someone's lived experience contradicts your own?
- Has someone offered you wisdom that you first rejected – or that surprised you?
- Have you ever wrestled with a wisdom teaching?
- How do you relate to wisdom offered by people of different ages and life stages?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS - 2

- Is it easy or hard to accept wisdom from people who are younger, older or the same age as you?
- How do you keep yourself (and your community) open to the wisdom of others? The wisdom that arises from unexpected places or people?
- How do you hold contradictory wisdom teachings?
- How does wisdom show up in your body – do you receive wisdom from intuition, feelings, and/or sensations?
- How has your relationship to wisdom (or wisdom sources) changed over your lifetime?
- Do you have a process for distilling wisdom from your own life experiences?
- Do you have spiritual practices that help you find wisdom? How do they lead you to wisdom?
- Are there children's stories or folk tales that stay with you because of the wisdom they offer?

Have you ever received wisdom from the unconscious?

According to Jungian psychology (not only the works of Carl G. Jung but interpreters such as Thomas Moore, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, James Hillman and many others) wisdom comes to us not only through our conscious minds but also via the Unconscious – through dreams, intuitions, synchronicities, and shared myths and symbols in the world. When life is understood through the symbolic lens, it often provides wisdom that is complementary – or challenging – to our personal ego's agenda.

Rev. Lynn



QUOTES

Knowledge is not wisdom. But wisdom is knowledge in action. I have lived most of my years immersed in the culture of books. I command a lot of facts. I comprehend a lot of concepts. That does not make me wise or even intelligent. It just indicates what I have memorized. But when I activate these facts and concepts to find the greatest, grandest version of myself, and then use them to work towards that vision, I begin the process of wisdom. The most essential question to ask myself is not “What do I think about this?” but rather “How do I feel about this?” In such simplicity is greatness made possible for an individual, a society and a human family.

Richard Wagamese

[Going on] retreat offers one time tested and capacious way to link us to spirit, the Muses, the natural world, and “whatever it is.” This helps us in changeable times, when it’s hard to maintain a sense of personal responsibility and connection to what’s most important to us...”

Kirsteen MacLeod

I wish people knew how strongly we believe that revelation has not been sealed. We continue to evolve, gain insights and wisdom based on what we learn and experience. As individuals and as a faith, we are continually in process. What a source of hope there is in this view of life and of ourselves!

Rev. Jullan Stoneberg

...If it's wisdom we're after, we must remember that the truest wisdom comes laced through with compassion, as we come to know how alike we are - each of us doing our best to find the path ahead and to keep on walking with our fragile, broken hearts. And all of us in deep need of each other's kindness.

Rev. Kathleen McTigue

I used to have lofty, poetic ideas about discussing time, mystery, and virtues, but after thinking about the elements of life through which wisdom can emerge in the day-to-day, I landed on five factors.

First, there are the words we speak. Second, the bodies we inhabit, and the realization that we’re surrounded by other people inhabiting their bodies and the complexity of that — it’s spiritual and not just physical. Third is hope, which I see as a choice and something we can cultivate like we do muscle memory. Fourth is love — there are many forms of it in our lives, and my sense is that we don’t treat all of them as seriously as we should. Finally, there is faith, whatever that is to you. It’s a fluid, diverse thing in modern lives, but it’s very real and evolving in interesting ways.

Krista Tippett

QUOTES - 2

Taoing

The way you can go
isn't the real way.

The name you can say
isn't the real name.

Heaven and earth
begin in the unnamed:
name's the mother
of the ten thousand things.

So the unwanting soul
sees what's hidden,
and the ever-wanting soul
sees only what it wants.

Two things, one origin,
but different in name,
whose identity is mystery.
Mystery of all mysteries!
The door to the hidden.

Ursula K. LeGuin's poetic translation of
Tao Te Ching.

"Philosophy begins in wonder"

Plato

Everyday I ask the loving voice of
wisdom, which dwells in our hearts and
in this world: "What would you have me
know today?" And then I listen.

Aram Mitchell

Wisdom, fundamentally, is knowing who
you are, where you are, and what you're
trying to do or be.

Gordon B McKeeman, [Becoming: A
Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood](#)

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of
the wise; seek what they sought.

Matsuo Bashō

To learn which questions are
unanswerable, and not to answer
them: this skill is most needful in
times of stress and darkness.

Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of
Darkness*

I don't pretend to understand this
great mystery in which we participate.
Whether we call it life, cosmos,
creation, Allah, God, or some other
grand name, no label is large enough. I
merely try to learn as much about it as
I can, during my brief time under the
sun. So I study what the most
perceptive of our ancestors have
discovered—artists and scientists as
well as spiritual seekers. I turn
outward to nature and to human
artifacts, and inward to the images
and voices that arise in silence. The
louder the world becomes, with its
relentless demands and messages, the
more precious silence becomes. I can't
prove that what emerges within me
arises from a source beyond the
boundaries of my own skin, but I
believe this is so. Simone Weil wrote
that "Absolutely unmixed attention is
prayer." What I pay attention to might
be my breath, a sentence in a book, a
butterfly on a zinnia blossom, my
granddaughter's face, a skein of music
or a skein of geese. I may do my
seeking outdoors or indoors, alone or
in company, but always the goal is the
same: to deepen my awareness of this
encompassing mystery.

Scott Russell Sanders



Photo: Mira Orchid/Pexels

Lectio Divina as a Personal Practice

Choose a short passage or poem, from a sacred text or book of meditations. Find a place that allows you to focus. Light a chalice if it helps to watch the flame.

- Sit in silence for a few moments.
- Read it carefully and slowly.
- Read it aloud.
- Reflect. Repeat words or phrases that resonate for you.
- Reflect on why they resonate, what meaning or understanding you are drawing from them. Reflection may be done through quiet contemplation, journaling or drawing.
- Consider how this insight might nourish you in the coming days.
- Read the text once more. Sit in silence for a few moments.

End with gratitude.

Pulling a card

There are many ways to work with oracle or tarot cards. One method of encouraging intuition and self-understanding involves shuffling the cards until you are ready, then pulling a card from your chosen deck. Sit with the card for a while. Notice the mood, the colours, the symbols. Pay attention to what speaks to you. Ask each aspect of the card (colours, imagery, symbols) what it represents in your life, what it has to tell you, today.

IN COMMUNITY

Clearness Committee: Every person has a source of inner truth

Early 17th Century Quakers believed that everyone has an inner teacher. They knew, as we know, how difficult it is to uncover our own connection to wisdom. Life gets busy. Our mind tells us stories.

Central to Quaker thought is the belief that we each have our own connection to wisdom, our own inner teacher. We do not need other people's guidance. But we *can* use some help. The "clearness committee" is a way for a small group of people to help one person (the "focus person") find their own inner teacher, the voice within. The primary activity of a Clearness Committee is asking open, honest questions – that is, questions to which the question-asker does not have an answer. "Have you thought of seeing a therapist?" is not an open honest question and not just because it is a yes/no question! There is an implied correct answer, which makes it advice.

During the two hours of a Clearness Committee, the committee members do their best to let go of their own ideas, advice, worries, or stories and instead put their attention to the focus person, letting new questions rise up in the moment. Each Committee has a scribe who records the questions, to hand to the focus person at the end of the session (committee members also hand over notes, if they take them), which helps the focus person stay present and in the moment, too.

Quaker author Parker Palmer has done much to revive the practice of the Clearness Committee. Training is available at the Center for Courage and Renewal, which continues his work. Guidelines for holding a Clearness Committee are available in Palmer's book *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (2009) and [online](#).

Rev. Karen



Photo: Domink van Opendenbosch/Unsplash

IN COMMUNITY - 2

Wisdom and World Religions

The third source for our living tradition is: Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life. We can learn from other faiths when we approach with respect.

Religions have some similarities – such as the golden rule – but are also often dissimilar in theology and values, as well as in cultural expression. Indeed, the value of interfaith dialogue, as a theology professor once told me, is when we get past being nice and agreeable about how we are alike and turn towards honest conversation about differences. That is when true understanding arises.

Visiting other religious communities, hosting interfaith speakers, are valuable ways to learn and connect across difference. I encourage UU congregations to have a representative on local interfaith councils, or to arrange visits and talks with other religions in your area.

Based in Ontario, [Encounter World Religions](#), offers excellent in-person and on-line classes and resources about religion. Encounter promotes religious pluralism, where people of diverse religious, spiritual and secular identities live and thrive in harmony with one another.

Rev. Fiona



Photo: Noah Holm/Unsplash

IN FOCUS

On "Perennial Wisdom"

The mystics of many faith traditions, along with many wise teachers in the secular world, offer variations on what's called "perennial wisdom." Often connected to what's called a "non-dual" spiritual perspective, it's generally rooted in some form of contemplative practice (such as centering prayer or mindfulness meditation). Spiritual teachers today such as Fr. Richard Rohr, Rabbi Rami Shapiro, Mirabai Starr and Eckhart Tolle as well as ancient sources such as Lao Tzu and Rumi, and many artists and poets, offer variations on perennial wisdom.

Richard Rohr writes: "There have been many generations of sincere seekers who've gone through the same human journey and there is plenty of collective and common wisdom to be had. It is often called the "perennial tradition" or the "perennial philosophy" because it keeps recurring in different world religions with different metaphors and vocabulary. The foundational wisdom is much the same, although never exactly the same." In his book *Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent*, Rabbi Rami Shapiro acknowledges that perennial wisdom is difficult to define, because it points toward that which is beyond all naming.

He writes, "From the perspective of the mystics and the perennial wisdom all names of God point beyond themselves and "toward" that which cannot be named. [...] We call this Source by such names as God, Reality, Brahman, Allah, One, Krishna, the Absolute, and the Nondual. The list of names is long: the reality to which they point is the same."

As Lao Tzu wrote, "the tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao." Rumi said, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there."

In the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism, we draw from six Sources that include wisdom from the world's religions as well as "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." As a result, many UUs may be intrigued and inspired by perennial wisdom.

Rev. Lynn

THE BOOKSHELF

Becoming Wise
An Inquiry into
the Mystery and
Art of Living
Krista Tippett

Becoming Wise

Krista Tippett (2016)

Broadcaster and author Krista Tippett from *On Being* has interviewed the most extraordinary voices examining the great questions of meaning. Tippett also created a chapter by chapter [Discussion Guide](#).

Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent: Sacred Teachings Annotated and Explained

Rabbi Rami Shapiro (2013)

Draws on the major world religions and their responses to the questions of human existence (Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? How shall I live? Why?)

The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart

Cynthia Bourgeault (2003)

Draws from Christian mysticism, Sufism, Gurdjieff work, modern physics and more.

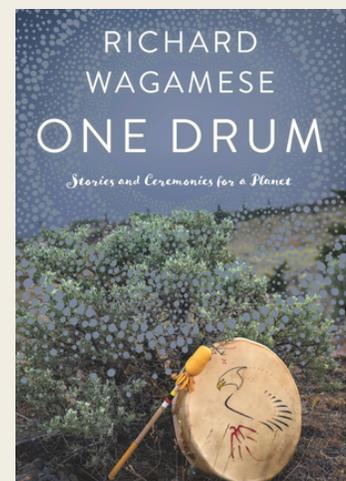
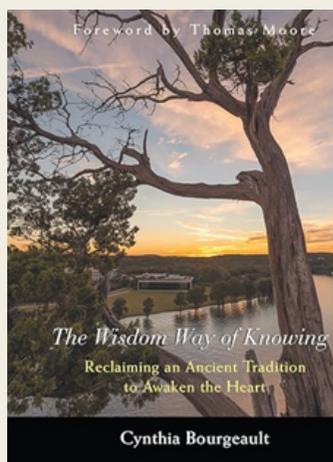
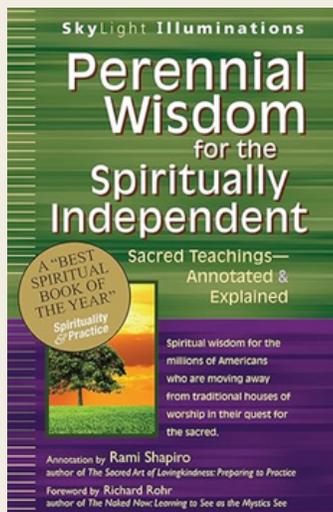
One Drum: Stories and Ceremonies for a Planet Richard Wagamese (2019).

Compiled from Wagamese's writing after his death, *One Drum* contains simple practices for individuals and groups to foster humility, respect and courage.

The Artist's Rule: Nurturing Your Creative Soul with Monastic Wisdom

Christine Valters Paintner (2011)

An inspiring guide to developing the relationship between contemplative practices and creative expression. Can be read and practiced alone, but it makes for a wonderful small group guide!



WITH CHILDREN

An Empty Cup - A Zen Wisdom Tale

Once there was a wise Zen monk. People travel from far away to seek his help and wisdom in learning the way.

One day a famous scholar comes to visit the wise Zen monk. "I have come so that you may teach me about Zen," he says.

"Very well", says the Zen monk. He begins to speak but the scholar soon interrupts him. This happens again and again.

The Zen Monk suggests they share some tea. The scholar talks as the monk prepares the tea. He keeps talking as the monk pours him a cup of tea. The monk keeps pouring. Soon the cup overflows.

Finally the scholar says "Stop! Can't you see the cup is full!"

The monk smiles. "You are like the cup – so full of knowledge nothing more can be added. Come back to me with an empty cup."

The Three Questions - Based on a story by Leo Tolstoy

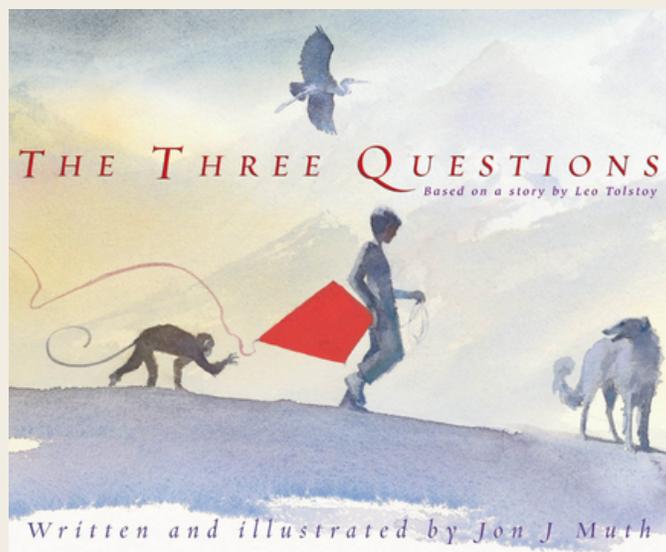
In this video, the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor shares a version of Tolstoy's story written & illustrated by Jon J. Muth:

https://youtu.be/MCCAhQY2Dnw?si=Vk8SYMmA4Enx_9hh

Read by Stella Anderson

Piano by Allison Halerz (Music: "Sicut Cervus" by Jason Shelton)

AV Production by Mike Halerz



ONLINE RESOURCES

Include contemporary Wisdom sources in your social media feeds. Métis artist and activist Christi Belcourt shares her art and her perspective on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

“How Thomas Stoppard’s Arcadia Literally Saved Lives”

<https://lithub.com/how-tom-stoppards-arcadia-literally-saved-lives/>

A good news story about a clinical scientist who found wisdom in a play. Contributed Meaning Making community member Christina Swindells-Nader, of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Winnipeg.

From *On Being* host, writer and wisdom seeker Krista Tippett, a short TED talk on practices for wisdom and wholeness:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McX2ZovIrCg>

Meditation teacher and psychologist Tara Brach explores how we access our inner wisdom in her podcast:

<https://www.tarabrach.com/accessing-innate-wisdom-audio/>

In this 2024 conversation with Dan Harris, host of the 10% Happier podcast, Tara and Dan discuss heart wisdom in difficult times.

<https://www.tarabrach.com/timeless-heart-wisdom/>

Wendell Berry’s “The Hidden Singer” as posted on Riehlife’s Poem of the Day:

<https://www.riehlife.com/2008/04/27/riehlife-poem-of-the-day-wendell-berrys-the-hidden-singer/>



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 Seeking Wisdom: The practice of seeking wisdom: what can we learn from the multiple truths that come from varied identities, life experiences, religions and cultures?

Chalice Lighting

We light this chalice in the spirit of wisdom—the wisdom to pause, to listen deeply, and to meet one another with curiosity and care.

May this light guide us toward truth, compassion, and a more loving way of being in the world.

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

This month we are reflecting on the practice of seeking wisdom: what can we learn from the multiple truths that come from varied identities, life experiences, religions and cultures?

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 Questions:

- Has your life experience assisted you in growing into wisdom?
- In what ways would you like to become more wise?
- How do you respond when you realize that you've been unwise?
- What can we learn from the multiple truths that come from varied identities, life experiences, religions and cultures?
- How do you respond when someone's lived experience contradicts your own?

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

May our wisdom show itself
by Philip Randall Giles

Now may our wisdom show itself
in compassion and understanding;
and may the fruits of the spirit
be apparent in our lives.

Extinguish the chalice



Photo: Esmatur Tetik/Pexels

“I’ve yet to meet a wise person who doesn’t know how to find some joy even in the midst of what is hard, and to smile and laugh easily, including at oneself.”
Krista Tippett

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.