

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Covenant Groups
Conformity
November, 2022

Chalice Lighting

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings,
but connected, in mystery and miracle,
to the universe, to this community and to each other.

Check-in. What is most on your mind today?

Opening Readings:

“Religions have always stressed that compassion is not only central to religious life, it is the key to enlightenment and is the true test of spirituality. But there always have been those who'd rather put easier goals, like doctrine conformity, in place.” (Karen Armstrong, British author)

“Most people are not even aware of their need to conform. They live under the illusion that they follow their own ideas and inclinations, that they are individualists, that they have arrived at their opinions as the result of their own thinking—and that it just happens that their ideas are the same as those of the majority.” (Erich Fromm, **The Art of Loving**)

Topic Exploration:

Conformity involves changing one’s belief or behavior in order to fit in with a group or a majority position. Four major reasons for conforming have been identified, though they can overlap.

- If you seek approval from, and fear rejection by, the majority, you may offer **compliance**, even if privately you hold a different view.
- If you admire the individuals or group promoting an idea or action, your wish to be **identified** with them may promote agreement.
- If you’re unsure, or uninformed, about an issue, you may seek out experts in the group, and conform because you trust the **information** they provide.
- If your own values and beliefs are consistent with the majority, **internalization** occurs, and you wholeheartedly conform to the majority opinion.

Conformity is neither totally good nor totally bad. Conformity influences the formation and maintenance of social norms, and helps societies function smoothly and predictably. For example, the way we greet people, the way we set the table, the way we que up to buy a ticket, can be examples of useful conformity. Professional groups (such as nurses, police officers, and teachers) develop both written and unwritten modes of behavior to which participants conform in order to maintain standards, and to assure consistency and cohesiveness.

The need for social approval and acceptance is part of our state as human beings. When people do not conform to their group, they are often called deviants, are less liked, and may even be punished by the group. However, members of a minority may have significant impact if they make a clear and consistent case for their point of view, and become significant influencers on the majority.

Questions/Sharing:

1. Unitarian Universalism is a religion without dogma, and champions the ongoing search for truth and meaning, instead of adherence to centuries-old revelation. As such, it does not conform to expectations of Christian believers, who comprise the majority of church-goers in America. How do you explain this nonconformity to Christian critics?
2. Journalist H. L. Mencken says, “The most erroneous assumption is to the effect that the aim of public education is to fill the young of the species with knowledge and awaken their intelligence, and so make them fit to discharge the duties of citizenship in an enlightened and independent manner. Nothing could be further from the truth. The aim of public education is not to spread enlightenment at all; it is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality.” Reflect on the pros and cons of Mencken’s contention that public education basically promotes conformity.
3. In a major study of influenceability, Alice Eagly, professor at Northwestern University, and Linda Carli, professor at Wellesley College, found that women are more persuadable and more conforming than men in group pressure situations if they believe their positions will be known to the group. What do you think accounts for this finding?
4. Katherine Ormerod, author of **Why Social Media is Ruining Your Life**, writes, “Instead of diversity and originality, what the majority of people on social media appear to want is more of the same. Conformity is rewarded by both the community and the system – what we ‘like’ most drives the algorithms, which in turn feed us more indistinguishable content which we happily consume.” To what extent do you believe social media promotes conformity, and what can be done to counter this tendency?
5. Nonconformity is defined as a failure to match or act like other people, or a conscious refusal to accept generally-accepted beliefs. To what extent do you believe you are a nonconformist, and give examples that illustrate your self-evaluation.
6. Can you think of instances in which a vocal minority has affected the outcome of a major public policy?

Closing Readings:

“Human beings are not machines, and however powerful the pressure to conform, they sometimes are so moved by what they see as injustice that they dare to declare their independence. In that historical possibility lies hope.” (Howard Zinn, former political science professor, Boston University, **You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times**)

“If you stand up and be counted, from time to time you may get yourself knocked down. But remember this: A man flattened by an opponent can get up again. A man flattened by conformity stays down for good.” (Thomas J. Watson Sr., former president of IBM)

Check-out and reflections on today’s session: Please express any closing thoughts on the content or process of today’s session.

Extinguish the Chalice

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Housekeeping

UUFVB covenant groups program/b.s.