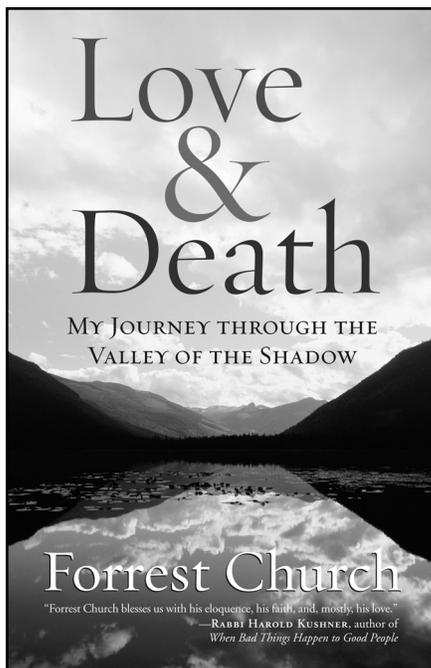


A LEADER'S GUIDE



Love & Death **MY JOURNEY THROUGH THE** **VALLEY OF THE SHADOW**

Forrest Church

by

Ken Beldon and Kent Matthies

A Guide to Forrest Church's *Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow*

Ken Beldon and Kent Matthies

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Introduction

For three decades Forrest Church has been a strong leader in the Unitarian Universalist movement. He is an excellent preacher, teacher, public theologian, and pastor. In *Love & Death*, Forrest provides courageous leadership in the way in which he is dying. He is living the end of his life in a “manner worth dying for.”

Forrest has been a mentor and friend to both of us. In ministry, in staying away from alcohol, and in living life we have been grateful to share and learn with him. We are highly honored to offer this study guide so that congregations can best utilize this highly valuable book. We truly believe that every Unitarian Universalist—and many others—can benefit greatly from the wisdom, care, and guidance found in *Love & Death*.

For decades death has been central to Forrest’s definition of religion. He says time and time again that “religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. Knowing we must die, we question what life means. Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? What is life’s purpose?”

At Ken’s ordination, Forrest charged him as a new minister, and as a person, to remember to “expect joy.” Life at times would be difficult enough, and suffering would come to visit Ken as inevitably it does everyone. Hence, Forrest instructed Ken to cultivate happiness, to recall the love and beauty of this life and to practice awakening to the miracle of our existence.

As Forrest charged Ken then, he continues to teach all of us now. With insightful Unitarian Universalist theology this book opens vistas for us to gain deeper appreciation of life, death, and the afterlife. *Love & Death* shows us how we can accompany others on their journeys through the valley of the shadow. Here we also learn about dying and living ourselves.

Many of us are drawn to this book because in various ways we have been blessed by Forrest’s ministry. We share the same grief and gratitude as did his congregant Camille, when she wrote, “My heart has been broken again, and for that I am overwhelmingly thankful; without love this would not be possible.” This leader’s guide will provide opportunity to give thanks for Forrest and for life itself.

Three, Six, Nine Sessions, or More: A Flexible Design

Reverend Nancy Palmer Jones did a wonderful job in writing the leader's guide for Forrest's *Life Lines: Holding On (and Letting Go)*. We thank Nancy, who graciously allowed us to use her structure and some of her language as we composed the leader's guide for *Love & Death*.

As every leader knows, each group has its own personality: some groups—and leaders—appreciate a great deal of structure; others prefer to be more free-form. This guide follows the sequence of chapters of “Part I: The Journey” and “Part II: The Destination.” You can choose to spend one meeting or two on each part of the book, creating up to a twelve-week workshop. You can even condense and combine sessions to cover the materials in only three weeks, if you like. Pick and choose among the exercises suggested here—or bring in your own—so that each meeting creates its own “story” to match the interests and style of your group.

Similarly the allotted times for each exercise are simply suggestions; you can expand or abbreviate questions, thoughts, responses and readings that participants may bring to each session.

The Gift of Listening and the Covenant of Trust

This book deals with some of the most serious themes found in our human exploration of meaning and existence. More simply said, this book contains stories and ideas that may be very difficult for some people to encounter. Forrest says God can be found in our tears. Each group may have a bounty of divine energy in sadness and pain. However, we also believe that in walking together over this terrain people will find courage, healing, and great joy.

Groups may vary widely in terms of how well people know each other. Yours may include people new to your group or congregation; it may consist of members who have known each other for a long time, or it may be some combination of the two. It's important to remember that even with people we think we know well, these discussions can bring out thoughts, feelings, or experiences we have never heard before.

Many of us feel shy or nervous about expressing our most heartfelt concerns in a group setting. It is also true that when these constraints fall away we can often gain a direct experience of the fact that we are not alone—not cut off from each other. This means that when people gather together to talk about life's deepest issues, they must feel safe.

Many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations have found a deepening of spiritual life through small group ministries known by many names, including covenant or chalice groups. We recommend that each group explicitly agree to similar dynamics found in those gatherings.

Begin the workshop by establishing a covenant of trust and care within your group. Emphasize that everyone should feel free to share only what feels comfortable. Commit to one another that confidentiality will be strictly maintained. Remind participants that their active listening can be their main gift to the group.

In fact, this time together should emphasize the value of compassionate listening. We want each individual to feel they have a space—and time—to share and feel “heard.” Deep listening often helps without responding in attempts to “fix” the other person's problems. As the leader you will need to model being truly “present” while each member of the group talks. Remind yourself to breathe and listen, receiving and validating what the person is sharing, ensuring that he or she is not interrupted. Also tactfully work to keep the group on track in terms of time and topic.

A Few More Words About Logistics

Because of the deeply personal nature of this exploration and discussion, you should try to keep the group size small; from four to about a dozen people is probably about best. The room should be comfortable, with flexible seating to allow for the exercises that ask the group to split into twos and threes.

Be sure to allow time at the end of each session for refreshments and socializing.

Before the workshop begins, remind participants that they will need to bring a notebook and a copy of *Love & Death*. Before the first session they should read the Introduction and chapters 1–4. At various points throughout the sessions, leaders will need a chalkboard, flip chart, or large pad of newsprint for some of the exercises. The leaders should also have crayons available throughout the sessions as some ask the participants to draw. At the end of the last session, leaders should also have a music player and envelopes available for the final exercise together.

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Session 1: Ancestors and Teachers

Chapters 1–4 of “Part I: The Journey”

“Death is not life’s goal, only life’s terminus. The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. This is where love comes into the picture. The one thing that can’t be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.”
—*Love & Death*, page x

This session focuses on:

- getting to know each other
- starting to build trust and connection and community in the group
- exploring their personal and spiritual past and their teachers in the ways of love and death

1. Getting Started 5 minutes

As soon as possible after the scheduled starting time, gather the group together and explain that because the purpose of your gatherings will be about listening, sharing, and awakening, you will start with a brief focusing exercise. With eyes closed and both feet on the floor with legs uncrossed, please invite participants to take three or four deep, unhurried breaths, checking for any signs of mental apprehension or physical tension and trying to release these as they exhale. Ask them to open their eyes and take into account their surroundings, the room, the faces of other people there with you.

2. Introductions 20 minutes

Please give a brief introduction to the series, borrowing from the book’s introduction, the previous introduction in this guide, or composing one from your own interests and your knowledge of the group. Remind the participants of the covenant of trust. Ask members to pair up with each other, ideally with someone they don’t know well. Include yourself. Ask them to briefly share their name, where they live or what they do, why they have joined this group, what they hope to learn, and what they hope to share.

Each member will then introduce their partner to the full group, using the knowledge they have just learned about one another.

3. “Sleep Tight Dear, Don’t Let the Bed Bugs Bite” *Individual Reflection and Group Discussion* 15 minutes

Ask participants to write down and then share on nighttime prayers or end of day meditations. Where and when did they first learn about death?

4. The Difference Between Knowledge and Wisdom *Group Discussion* 15 minutes

“The world won’t perish for want of information, it may perish for want of appreciation.” —Abraham Joshua Heschel

Ask participants what distinction they make between knowing a lot and possessing wisdom. Our age has much more of the former, does this correlate more with the latter? Like Forrest’s grandmother who lived in a “simple time”, what might our volume of knowledge conceal from us and not just reveal to us?

5. The First Time Death Hits Home 60 minutes

a. Turning Points

Group Discussion 20 minutes

“We do not and cannot possess the ones we love, for we hold them on loan. This hard truth makes the courage to love also the courage to lose. It speaks most eloquently when everything we cherish is in jeopardy, when our expectations for the way life ought to be are interrupted and challenged by death.”

—*Love & Death*, page 9

When did the reality of death hit home for you; when did you first experience grief when someone you loved died? What were your primary responses—shock, awakening, sadness, etc.

b. Recalling Forrest

Group Discussion 20 minutes

If people have personal experiences with Forrest and they would like to share, please invite them to do so now. If not, please go directly to C.

c. Mourning Your Parents

Group Discussion 20 minutes

If you have experienced the death of a parent, what did you learn from this particular kind of grief? How do you see you parent(s) now differently from how you saw them when they were alive?

6. Coming Out of Hiding *Group Discussion* 15 minutes

“Whenever we ally ourselves with something greater than ourselves, we run risks, sometimes enormous risks. At the very least, such allegiances demand our time and our money and energy. They call on us to come out of hiding. They call on us to risk our hearts by the giving of our love.”

—Forrest Church, page 16

What is the first love you had that compelled you to move beyond yourself, that captured your heart and asked you to risk?

7. Teachers

Individual Reflection and Group Discussion 30–45 minutes

“As her therapist told the writer Anne Lamott just before Lamott’s best friend died, ‘Watch her carefully right now, because she’s teaching you how to live.’

—*Love & Death*, page 21

Who are your most important teachers in the meaning and reality of death and life? Compose a letter to one of them, expressing your gratitude for their teaching. (Beyond class, or within it, if you have time, encourage the participants to start making out their Ethical Wills, which Forrest writes about.)

8. Wrapping Up *5 minutes*

“In the difficult are the friendly forces, the hands that work on us.”

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Before your closing remarks, do some final breathing exercises, inviting them to have the discussion settle within them. Then, thank the participants for their honesty and their openness to share and listen. Please remind them to read Chapters 5–7 of Part I for the next time you gather.

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Session 2: Life Lines, Life Skills, and Life Sentences

Chapters 5–7 of “Part I: The Journey”

“Life is a gift, not a given.

One day we will go to sleep and not wake up again.

The path of life is strewn with trapdoors.

Every day is a miracle.” —*Love & Death*, page 42

This session focuses on:

- deepening group connections
- identifying our life skills and our life lines
- how the group deals with unexpected loss and how this clarifies what really matters for them.
- awakening to both vulnerability and love
- moving beyond intellectual knowledge into the experience of love and death

1. Waking Up and Checking In

Group Practice and Discussion 10 minutes

Do some deep and cleansing breathing together, in the same fashion as before, asking group members to focus inwardly on their hopes, their fears, their feelings on what they expect to receive tonight. Then, briefly ask the group if there are any unresolved thoughts or reflections from last session’s time together.

2. Wanting, Doing, and Being

Individual Practice and Group Reflection 45 minutes

a. Want What You Have

Individual Reflection 15 minutes

Write an answer to the question: Are you more likely to practice “wishful thinking” or “thoughtful wishes?” Do you experience satisfaction with your life or do you find yourself engaging in the “grass is always greener” kinds of thoughts?

b. Do What You Can

Group Discussion 15 minutes

Participants discuss their level of satisfaction with their effort in life in regard to work, justice, other people, etc.

c. Be Who You Are

Individual Practice 15 minutes

Draw a representational or abstract picture of who you are when you are most fully engaged, making the greatest use of your specific gifts, talents, and life.

Facilitator, please delay these questions: “How often are you this person in your life? Would like to be more of this?” What’s stopping you?

3. Vulnerability, Suffering, and Compassion

Group Discussion 30 minutes

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

—Paul, the Christian Scriptures

How do various theologies, philosophies, and models try to convince us that suffering is an illusion and we can transcend all of life’s pain. What is the moral and spiritual cost to us if we hold ourselves about the pain of our brothers and sisters? Talk about the kind of strength that paradoxically derives from our vulnerability.

4. Your Tear Cup

Individual Exercise and Drawing 15 minutes

“Why save [your tears]? Because they are precious. It doesn’t matter why you cried, your tears are still precious, for they show that you care. A full cup of tears is proof that you have felt deeply, suffered, and survived.”

—*Love & Death*, page 37

Draw the cup that overflows with your tears you have cried for what you have loved. Name and color each of individual tear drops in your cup. Why are these precious to you?

5. Awakening Beyond Soothing

Group Discussion 15 minutes

“Religion shouldn’t be a pacifier. Religion should awaken us, throw open a window, point to a trapdoor. . . . If we forget how dangerous the waters are, spending our lives rearranging the deck chairs to catch the sun, lulling ourselves to the gentle background of a soothing sound track, we set up our lives to do only one important thing: watch them pass before our drowning eyes.” —*Love & Death*, pages 45–46

How do you each stay awake in the face of life’s realities? How do we take comfort in what is truly comforting without becoming detached from the pains and struggles of life? How do we enjoy life and remain aware of the omnipresent trapdoors?

6. After the Iceberg Has Hit

Guided Meditation 10–15 minutes

Leader reads as if the ship is going down, there aren’t enough life rafts for everyone. Where are you on the ship? What words do you say? Who do you reach out for? And what do you let go of? Describe the scene as clearly as you can, going deliberately so that the listener has time to imagine the scene and call to mind what’s being asked of them.

7. Preparing Your Own Funeral

Individual Writing Exercise 20 minutes

The participants have died, but each of them gets to leave one final gift. You get to write your funeral. Where is it? Who is there? What are the readings, songs, poems, liturgies that will give the most comfort to those who mourn you and also best express the meaning of your life? Do you want to say a final “I love you” or “good-bye” to anyone? And who says something there about you and their love for you that surprises you?

8. Benediction

Closing Readings at the End of Funerals, Read Aloud to Each Other in the Group 5 minutes

What are the final words you will share—your writing or a quote from another? Read them aloud to one another as you close.

9. For Next Time

Thank the participants for their time and commitment to the group, and for their honesty and willingness to share from the heart.

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Session 3: Being at Home with Ourselves, God, and the Universe

Chapters 8–10 of “Part I: The Journey”

“Taken literally (in Hebrew and Greek as well as in Latin) *conversion* is not ‘rebirth’ but ‘turning.’ Once converted, we redirect our journey.” —*Love & Death*, page 58

“Learn the alchemy true human beings know. The moment you accept what troubles you’ve been given, the door will open.” —Rumi

This session focuses on:

- the meaning of difficulty, and how it both can help and hinder our personal spiritual development
- the unexpected nature of tragedy, both personal and national
- the particular place that September 11th holds in people’s memories
- examining what the meaning of an Easter Faith is for the participants.
- transitioning to “The Destination,” the second half of *Love & Death*

1. Session Opening—Inviting God In

Opening Prayer 5 minutes

For the Opening, the facilitator invites God, the Holy, etc. to join us tonight, that we might make a home in our lives for the highest, the deepest, the most loving in our hearts. Leave space for others to share their spoken prayers and wishes aloud as well.

2. Removing the Blockages

Individual Drawing 15 minutes

“Sobriety didn’t change my theology, certainly not the premium is placed on the axis of love and death, but it did deepen it one significant sense. I now fully felt what before I had mostly thought.” —*Love & Death*, page 57

Ask participants to imagine their life as an artery, a main vessel carrying the blood that sustains life around. If they’ve seen the drug commercial, they will know that sometimes the plaque builds up in the walls of the artery, causing it to shut down the free flow of the lifeblood. Ask them to draw what the plaque is that gums up their spiritual lives. What plaque is there and how might they remove it so the flow of life can become free again?

3. Grace and Gravy

Group Conversation 15 minutes

To quote from Raymond Carver (page 58) where have the participants experienced *gravy*—the sense of life just being an absolute blessing? An unearned, but richly enjoyed gift? Have the participants had the experience of being offered a new lease one life? What is their response to life as *gravy*?

4. September 11th

Group Discussion 30 minutes

Facilitator, please keep in mind and be sensitive that some of the participants may have been deeply and directly personally affected by 9/11. Give permission up front for people to feel what they feel and to opt out of discussion and the following exercise if the emotions are overwhelming.

“At first these visions of a future rebuilt upon yesterday’s ashes may seem to contradict one another. Justice and mercy. Anger and compassion. War and love. Yet they will only be at odds should we choose one vision in place of the other.”

—*Love & Death*, page 63

Thinking back to that day, where were you? What was your first response and your reactions and behaviors in the weeks and months after? How did this change your sense of safety? Your religious ideas? Your feelings about our country and other nations? Your beliefs about different cultures and faiths? What opportunities were realized out of the crisis? Which were lost?

5. Life Lines and Last Lines

Guided Meditation and Individual Writing 15–20 minutes

The facilitator will slowly read this short, guided meditation about imagining the unimaginable: “The planes have crashed and the Towers are falling. Who and what will be on your lips? What is the lifeline you will reach out for, and to? What are the last lines that you might want to utter? Is it a prayer, poetry, a simple good-bye?”

Please ask the participants to write down the last lines they can imagine themselves saying. And share them with each other if they feel moved to do so.

6. Having An Easter Faith

Group Discussion 30 minutes

“My faith isn’t grounded in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I ground my faith, my Christian faith, instead in the spiritual rebirth of Jesus’s followers, a saving transformation as available to us today as it was to his disciples so very long ago.”

—*Love & Death*, page 70

“Only one solvent can loose our hearts from self-protective captivity. Only love. And only a forgiving heart, one capable both of accepting and bestowing forgiveness, is open to both

to give and receive the saving power of love. This is the essence of Jesus’s gospel. We are all children of God.”

—*Love & Death*, page 74

How does one believe in Jesus without literally believing in the resurrection? What does it mean to have and to practice an Easter faith as Forrest understands it? Death and love stand at the center of the Easter message. Why is death love’s greatest enemy and also love’s greatest ally? Do you believe that love is stronger than death and that love is stronger than the fear of death?

7. Preparing for Next Session

Group Discussion 10–15 minutes

Forrest has taken us up to this place in our reading, through his life, his sobriety, and to his ultimate affirmation that love, by casting out our fear, is stronger than death. We prepare for the next session as Forrest is about to get a death sentence. Let us remember that at some point we all will get this sentence. In “The Journey,” Part I of *Love & Death*, Forrest reminds us that our awakening can begin long before our deathbed is reached. As your prepare for Part II, “The Destination,” think on these words: how are you awakening before you die? End with some closing breathing, perhaps accompanied by some meditative music or a requiem. Thank each of the participants for their willingness to share and, if this is case, for their vulnerability and compassion with each other.

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Session 4: Living the Odds and Finishing the Ends

Chapters 11–14 of “Part II: The Destination”

“Theology is poetry, not science. During our brief span, we interpret the greatest and most mysterious masterpiece of them all, the creation itself. The creation is our book of revelation.”

—*Love & Death*, page 80

“The universe is made up of stories, not atoms.”

—Muriel Rukeyser

This session focuses on:

- relating to the answerable and unanswerable questions of human existence
- sharing how we deal with the randomness and tragedy that are a part of life.
- awareness of our own feelings, thoughts, and fears when

we are in the presence of a person who is in pain.

- responding to others' suffering with true help and compassion.
- recognizing how amazing it is that we are alive in the first place

1. Session Opening—The Cathedral of the World of Your Group

Group Exercise 15 minutes

Before the class starts, the group leader should sketch out a cathedral like structure on chalkboard or flipchart. Ask each participant to draw his or her life as a window on the cathedral. What color is the light that shines in to the group through their particular window? What words and feelings shine in that light as well?

2. When Bad Things Happen

Mini-Group Discussions 30 minutes

“The rain falls on the just and the unjust.” —Jesus

“Whenever a trapdoor swings or the roof caves in, don't ask ‘Why?’ Why will get you nowhere. The only question worth asking is, ‘Where do we go from here?’ And part of the answer must be ‘together.’” —*Love & Death*, page 82

Break up into pairs or groups of three. Have the group focus on these questions: Think of a time in your life or the life of someone you care about when things were extremely difficult. What opportunity did the crisis first hide and then reveal? What helped you to discover where you wanted to go next and how you might get there?

3. Giving Care to Loved Ones Who Are in Pain

Group Discussion and Brainstorming Exercise 30–45 minutes

When people in our communities suffer, we often want to help. At times we don't know how. Hospitals can be especially intimidating places to show care.

As a veteran minister Forrest provides a list of tips for visiting people in the hospital. The first piece of wisdom rings true for many situations: just showing up speaks volumes—many times there is no “right thing” to say. Sometimes we avoid our loved ones in pain because we don't know what to say.

Read aloud the final three paragraphs on page 86 together. (Begin with the sentence, “Let me try to defuse this problem for you.”)

Focus the conversation on people's fears in being with loved ones. Ask them to share stories of comfort they have been provided or have provided someone else. And also times when a lifeline failed to connect or, in the words of *Free to Be You and Me*, “sometimes the help is the kind of help we all can do without.”

Pretend the participants are each in the hospital. Brainstorm a list of conversation or interactions that they would find helpful.

4. Unfinished Business

Large and Small Group Discussion and Individual Reflection 30–45 minutes

In reflecting upon his own situation Forrest has found clarity and comfort in categorizing his activities into two areas: ongoing business and unfinished business. He says that “‘if only’ are the two saddest words in the English language.” No matter where we are on life's journey we all have regular, ongoing activities in which we engage. The question for each person is “what would you regret if you could not complete?” For this activity, place a flip chart up and write two columns “unfinished business” and “ongoing business.” Give each person ten post it notes. Have each person write two to five examples of each category for his or her own life. These examples can be past, current, or future. Allow time for people to go forward and stick their post-it notes on the respective columns. Facilitate a conversation of thoughts and feelings.

On pages 95–97, Forrest created a list of ten ways to realistically and effectively attend to unfinished business. Read this list out loud, rotating readers in the circle. Break out into groups of three to discuss how you can apply these ideas to your own life. Regardless of where you are on life's journey can you dedicate more time and energy to unfinished business?

5. Climbing A Small Hill

Individual Exercise/Drawing 15 minutes

Forrest encourages us on page 97 to, “Dream possible dreams. Set out to climb a single hill, not every mountain.” Ask the participants to draw the next small hill they need to climb in their lives—professional, personal, spiritual, whatever the case may be. And ask them to also draw the supplies and resources they will need to carry with them as they start their climb.

6. Beating the Odds and Saying Thanks

Group Reflection and Individual Writing Exercise 30 minutes

“Take a moment to ponder life's cosmic odds and how you've already beaten them. You, I, each one of us here . . . have miraculously run our courses from the instant of creation to the advent of life on earth and on through billions of generations to reckon the privilege of looking out on this magnificent morn.” —*Love & Death*, page 104

As a group, discuss all the things that had to happen so they might be alive here. Ask them to recall their ancestors, where they came from, how their parents met, their person

origins, the close calls or brushes with mortality they might have known.

After group discussion, ask them to compose a “thank you” letter to God, the universe, their parents, mentors, the source or sources that they are grateful toward so that they might have time on this earth. Ask them to recognize that this amazing grace is a source for gratitude, for taking nothing for granted.

Before they write, share this quote with them:
 “All moments are key moments and life itself is grace.”

—Frederick Buechner

7. Wrapping Up 5 minutes

Before the ending, close with a time of silence, and ask people to focus on what they were grateful for in their time together tonight. Read from page 84:

“And now in our going may God bless and keep us,
 May the light of God shine upon us and out from within us
 And be gracious unto us and bring up peace.
 For this is the day we are given.
 Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

If you wish, end each of the remaining sessions with the same benediction.

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Session 5: Thoughtful Wishes for a Humble God

Chapters 15–17 of “Part II: The Destination”

“By wanting what we have, doing what we can, and being who we are, our cup will forever be half full, not half empty. Do these same things with reverence, humbled by awe, and our cup runneth over.” —Love & Death, page 112

This session focuses on:

- articulating an honest and humble wisdom
- the kind of teaching that we can truly rely upon
- how families thrive or falter when confronted by the presence of death
- understanding God differently than as an omnipotent or capricious ruler of the universe
- finding God in the stories of our hearts

1. Musical Awakening

Song 5 minutes

Play Bobby McFerrin’s version of the 23rd Psalm. Invite listeners to breathe and be at peace while they listen.

2. Your Cup Runneth Over

Individual Drawing Exercise 15 minutes

Ask participants to draw their cup of life. What is in their cup right now? Do they want what they have in their cup? Is it honestly feeling half full or half empty? Depleted or overflowing?

3. Is God in the Storms or in the Tears?

Group Discussion 30 minutes

In 2004, the tsunami devastated many areas in Asia. In 2007, wildfires burned southern California. In religion, theodicy explores the relationship between God and evil, or bad things. Forrest believes it is poor theology to assign responsibility to God for such events (page 109). Such a God would not be worthy of our praise. Do you agree? Forrest sees God in the tears and pain following disaster. God energizes people to have greater levels of compassion and renewal. Does this resonate with your own personal theology? How does your understanding of the relationship between the divine and terrible events help you in the living of your life?

4. Family Responses

Group Discussion 30 minutes

At the beginning of chapter 15, Forrest tells us that his brush with death made his loving family that even more loving, strengthening its ties in the face of his cancer. Have any of the participants ever had a life-altering medical diagnosis, or has anyone in their family ever had the same? Did their ties that bind grow tighter or slacken and loose some of their power to hold? How did the presence of disease or mortality reveal the character of their family life—did it release hidden potentialities or reveal covered trapdoors?

5. Words to Live By

Group Discussion and Individual Writing Exercise 30 minutes

A theological mantra can help focus the mind on positive realities. During difficult and good times a mantra reminds us what we believe and from where we get our solace. On page 110 Forrest includes his favorite mantras, including “The purpose of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for.”

Read the other mantras that Forrest lists aloud in the group. Discuss which ones resonate or are most helpful. Do you have your own mantra(s)? Invite each person to decide upon a mantra that he or she will utilize regularly until the next group meeting. Write in a journal about how practicing with the mantra affects your daily life. Next time the group gathers start with five minutes of silence and then they will share about their experiences working with their chosen mantra.

6. Faces and Places of the Dying

Drawing and Group Discussion 15 minutes

On page 115, Forrest writes about Damon Brant's Hospice: the simple, powerful images of his father's deathbed and of those who were around him. What are the images that the group members took away from their experiences by the sides of deathbeds? First ask them to draw that image or images and then ask them to share those pictures with the group.

7. "A Capacious, if Unfathomable, Power"

Group Discussion 30 minutes

On page 121, Forrest traces his initial aversion to preaching about God or approaching the creation with less an appreciative eye than a judgmental one. But, "challenged by the demands of love and death," Forrest began to engage God-talk, using words that he knew could never capture the reality that he was pointing toward. Eventually, he makes peace with the fact that "Final answers to ultimate questions lie far beyond the ken of human understanding." His faith yearns for and expresses the longing for God, even as he admits that "a divine hand may turn out not to be there."

How does the experience of the group relate to Forrest's quest to know and experience God? Have they left the quest behind or does the quest animate their days. Have they, like Forrest, gone through stages and steps of engagement with God, letting go of lesser conceptions of the Divinity, yet still continuing to find an abiding and inviting mystery that encourages them to grow?

8. Wrapping Up and Preparing for the Final Session

5 minutes

In your closing meditation ask participants to reflect on readings, images, stories, songs, poems, etc., that are resonant for them because of your work together. As a way of ending with grace and gratitude, ask them to bring these in to share with each other when you meet for your final session next time. Also, ask them to bring in a photo or keepsake of someone they love who has died for a "Day of the Dead" practice.

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Session 6: Life and Love, Before and After Death

Chapters 18–20 of "Part II: The Destination"

"All I know is this. Religion starts here. It starts at the entrance to the tomb." —*Love & Death*, page 127

"The end is where we start from." —T.S. Eliot

This session focuses on:

- completing the work the group has started together
- inviting space for further reflection upon what the group has learned and how its members plan to incorporate what they've learned into their lives
- exploring thoughts about the afterlife
- learning to say good-bye with love
- sharing memories of our beloved departed
- living fully so our death might be a peaceful one

1. Reflecting on Your Mantras 5 minutes

Begin with some moments of centering breathing and silent meditation together. Going around the room have each person say just a few words about what it was like to work with their mantra since the last gathering.

2. Life After Death

Group Discussion 30 minutes

Universalism was named based upon a specific belief that all human beings go to a literal heaven in the afterlife. Within most modern UU congregations, people have a rich variety of opinions on what happens after we die. Some UUs believe that our memory of a deceased loved one is the soul itself. Others believe that souls go to a paradise of communion with all souls. Forrest believes there is no hell, but, whether it is to fulfillment or extinction we go, there is peace. We come from and return to God.

Take an easel and write down the beliefs of the people in the room.

Which ideas about life after death resonate with you? Which ones give you comfort? Do you feel that our congregations effectively cultivate appreciation and respect for the wide variety of views on the afterlife?

What do people make of Forrest's thoughts about studies that show a remarkable similarity of the experiences of people who have had "near death" episodes?

3. Day of the Dead

Individual Sharing and Group Discussion 15 minutes

Throughout many areas of Latin America communities and religious institutions are spiritually nourished through activities of Day of the Dead. Counter to many ideas about death in our society this is a happy time of reunion with the souls and memories of the dead. Now some of our UU congregations are also observing *Dia de los Muertos* with celebratory music, beautiful flowers, and photos of deceased loved ones. Using a small table, pretty cloth, and a few flowers, prepare a simple altar. Invite each participant to take turns coming forward to show the photo or keepsake of a deceased loved one. Place photo on the altar and, if you wish, share about how that person touched your life.

4. Sharing of Collected Stories, Songs, and Sources

Individual Sharing and Group Discussion 15–30 minutes

Please ask participants to read aloud, or play, their prose, poems, or music that they have selected. Ask participants to explain how and why these objects were inspired by their engagement with each other and *Love & Death*.

5. Saying Good-bye Early and Often

Individual Writing and Reflection 15–20 minutes

Forrest's wife Carolyn says that giving death is a lot like giving birth. Write about your experiences with saying good-bye to those who are dying. Have you accompanied and supported someone in such a way while he or she was dying? How might you appreciate the support of a caring friend during your dying? If you were to go today, who would you like to tell that you love them, because they may not be as aware of your love as you'd like them to be?

Are you then willing to commit to telling someone in your life you love him or her in the coming week? This could be someone with whom you haven't shared your feelings recently.

6. Peace at Our End

Group Discussion 30 minutes

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "love is the reconciliation of man with God." He was an awe-inspiring embodiment example of this truth. As he awaited his death by the Nazis he felt peace in his heart, because he felt the love of family, friends, and God. His letter to his fiancé served as a beautiful good-bye because of his reassurances. (Read out loud the bottom of page 136 to the end of the letter on page 137.)

As the group moves toward the end of their time together, ask them to reflect, as Forrest does as the end of his life approaches, on the life that might flash before their eyes. Forrest sees scrabble games and jigsaw puzzles with his fam-

ily. His three book-a-week fix and all night long drinking sessions with friends, even though he's happily sober for years, are both fondly recalled. He takes pleasure, not pride, in the books he has written, and sees his own joys reflected in an aqua blue ocean. He turns back around again to his famous father, content that he didn't and couldn't surpass him, but is now gathered to him in the loving embrace of memory.

What are the participants hopes for what their life will be as it shows before their eyes when they face death? What are their individual cherished memories?

7. Carrying Forward and Moving On with Gratitude

Group Reflection and Individual Exercise 45 minutes

"On beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing there is a field. I will meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about." —Rumi

a. Group Reading and Reflection

Read "A Closing Prayer" (pages 141–143) together. Whether it is Christmas or not, it is a final, great gift to each other as you prepare to finish your time together.

Invite participants to share what they have learned and/or any insights that they've decided to apply to their lives.

b. Individual Writing Exercise

For the final exercise, the group will practice what Quaker teacher Parker Palmer once observed and lamented—that in groups and retreats that he leads, that people often write down others' reflections, but not their own.

Hand out a stamped envelope and piece of paper so the group members can capture their words on paper. Ask participants to write down their concluding thoughts about their time together and their experience that they wish to keep. Ask them to write down their final thoughtful wishes that arose from their group experience. Ask them to sign and seal the letters. The group leader will pledge to mail them to the participants exactly two weeks after the group concludes.

At the end, please consider a closing celebration or plan to share a meal together as a way to reflect and savor the time you have spent together.

Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow (Beacon Press, 2008) is available in the following formats:

- Paperback
- Audio (an unabridged version, read by Forrest Church)
- E-book (including Kindle)

Order *Love & Death*

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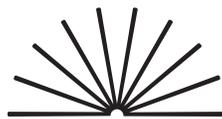
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