

# BEACON PRESS DISCUSSION GUIDES

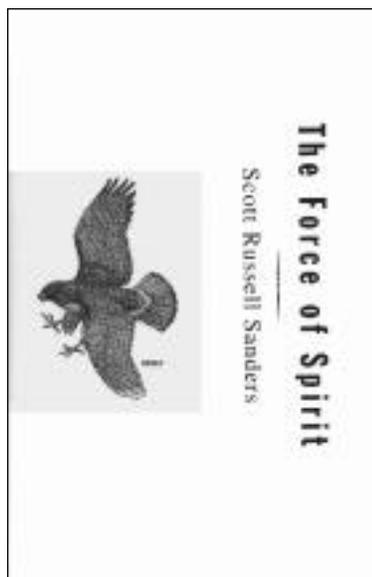
for Unitarian Universalist Communities

# The Force of Spirit

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

A LEADER'S GUIDE

BY SOFÍA BETANCOURT



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***The Force of Spirit***

**by Scott Russell Sanders**

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Leader's Guide

by Sofia Betancourt

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## INTRODUCTION

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“Spirituality” is a word that gets a lot of contemporary usage, yet does not have a single, agreed upon meaning. For many of us it invokes a sense of religiosity that goes beyond the measures and boundaries of doctrines and creeds. Spirituality can be about the process of living as a person of a particular faith. It can also focus on the broader notion of how humanity lives and struggles with the major questions of life. How do we take our teachings, theories, practices and beliefs and apply them to the wider world?

For Unitarian Universalists, spirituality reflects the diversity of personal belief found in our congregations and therefore has a wide range of meanings. In *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, Rev. John Buehrens explains that Unitarian Universalists work to balance mind and spirit in their everyday wrestling with the questions of life:

Unitarian Universalism aspires to a special form of religious community—one in which individuals are never asked to check their minds at the church door, but in which they offer one another the possibility of rediscovering an authentic and personal spirituality. We remind ourselves that how we live does matter, even after we die. We are related, forever, to one another. (John A. Buehrens in “Mind and Spirit,” *A Chosen Faith*, p. 169)

When giving a working definition during her workshop on small group ministry at the Pacific Central District Assembly of 2001, Rev. Rachel Anderson reminded us that the term “spirituality” can raise tension in our congregations. She highlighted the importance of using broad understandings of spirituality so that everyone, from humanists to theists, would find room to enter into the conversation. With these concerns in mind, she defined spirituality as having a “sense of, or experiencing, something larger than yourself.” This “something larger” takes many forms, each of them distinct and precious as the individual people who join our worship communities. How then, do we go about sharing our personal sense of spirituality? How do we come to a sense of innate knowing

about our own beliefs and experiences of life?

In *The Force of Spirit*, Scott Russell Sanders invites us into a time of his life when he is intimately examining the ultimate questions. He prefers the word “Spirit” for his something larger, “because the word seems to catch the lightness, radiance, and wind-like subtlety of the power that [he] seek[s].” (p. 3) It is in his poignant and personal reflections on life that Sanders educates us about how personal stories and memories help us to understand life’s greatest mysteries. His collection of essays is a stirring invitation to take stock of our own beliefs and to receive the gifts of learning that our lives offer us.

The purpose of this discussion program is to provide a framework for Unitarian Universalist discussion groups to share ideas about:

- Unitarian Universalist spirituality;
- the value of our life experiences and what they have to teach us;
- how our beliefs and values have changed during our lifetimes; and
- how our personal stories can help us in examining our own spirituality.

This program encourages the participation of adults of all ages. We offer it with the hope that it creates a safe space for personal sharing and reflection on the call of spirit in our lives.

## **GETTING STARTED**

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### **Promote the Program**

Many congregations have a number of resources for publicizing new programs in the community. It is always a good idea to create flyers and post notices on bulletin boards and in newsletters. Announcements during meetings and services help spread the word. Some congregations promote new programs by organizing “Kick-off Sundays,” which include a sermon by a minister or lay leader about a related topic.

You might consider targeting specific groups to embark on this journey. For example, discussion groups or support groups for new members and worship associates might have a particular interest in this program. This series is ideally suited for use in covenant groups (small group ministry), adult religious education classes, and book clubs. The program might serve as an opportunity to expand your relationship with other congregations in your area. Consider inviting members of other churches to join you in this program, and use it to build bridges between your communities.

### **Adjust the Format as Needed**

This program includes reading, reflection and participation in three two-hour discussion sessions. We recommend a group size of no more than ten people. While the discussion guide offers specific questions, readings and activities, feel free to adapt the program to your own needs. You can substitute your own questions, adapt those that are provided here and add thoughts of your own.

### **Provide a Comfortable Setting**

Hold the session in a comfortable, well-lit setting, preferably with cushioned chairs arranged in a circle. Some discussions will be carried out in small groups of two to four people, so it is important to find a space that will enable uninterrupted discussion for small groups as well as for the larger group. The discussion sessions call for information to be recorded on newsprint, so you will need newsprint, markers, and adequate wall space or easels to display what has been written. Bring nametags for participants to use. You might ask volunteers to provide refreshments and perhaps a light snack.

Do your best to hold the sessions in a room that is wheelchair accessible. Make sure that the circle of chairs leaves enough space for those using mobility devices. When people register, it's a good idea to ask them if they have particular accessibility needs. When you promote the workshop, tell people that you will do your best to accommodate their accessibility needs (such as large print materials) if they provide advance notice. However, if your space is not wheelchair accessible, let people know. Offer to strategize solutions with them.

## Involve the Group in Setting the Tone

The group should take responsibility for creating an environment that is welcoming and conducive to open dialogue. Bring to the group's attention the importance of active listening, thoughtful responses and mutual respect. Also, note that occasional silences are acceptable. Use people's own experiences as a way to ground the discussion when it threatens to become too abstract.

Some people have a tendency to be more vocal than others. If a few people clearly dominate the conversation, you might need to open a space for those who have not had a chance to speak to do so if they wish.

As a discussion leader, it is important to establish a balance between too much control and too little direction. It will be important to be responsive in your leadership and draw people out, yet keep the discussion on track.

We suggest that the group draft a set of ground rules at the beginning of the first session, post them on newsprint, and review them at the beginning of the second and third sessions. If all participants give input, everyone will be accountable to the group's needs.

Common ground rules include:

- ❑ maintain confidentiality—don't repeat personal stories outside of the group;
- ❑ make personal ("I") statements—don't speak for others;
- ❑ give full attention to the person who is speaking;
- ❑ use inclusive language—be aware of the light/dark dichotomy used by Sanders in his writing; and
- ❑ turn off pagers and cell phones during the program.

## Prepare for the First Session

Ask participants to read Scott Russell Sanders' *The Force of Spirit* in its entirety before the first session. Encourage them to keep a journal of their thoughts and reactions while reading the book, and throughout the course of the program. Let them know that they will be encouraged to bring in their own life experiences and spiritual beliefs to share with the group, as well as to reflect on the feelings catalyzed by Sanders' writing. Remind participants to bring Sanders' book and their journals with them to the meetings.

Contact your minister or Worship Committee to inform them that the group will be creating a worship service as one of their activities. Find out if there is a standard method for planning lay-led services in the church (or churches if there are multiple congregations involved). Work with the minister or Worship Committee to ensure that this act of sharing the results of the program with the larger community goes smoothly.

## Evaluate the Program

Two evaluation forms are provided in the last pages of this guide. Participant Evaluation Forms should be distributed at the end of the final session so participants can give feedback to group leaders. (Note that questions 7 and 8 on the form give leaders a chance to pose their own questions to participants.) Also, be sure to send Beacon Press your completed Leader Evaluation Form. We are striving to meet the program needs of UU congregations, and your continued feedback and suggestions will bring us a long way toward reaching our goal. We really want to hear from you!

## SESSION ONE

**Materials:** Newsprint, markers, masking tape, chalice, candle, matches, UUA Hymnal (*Singing the Living Tradition*, Boston: UUA, 1993), paper, pens, nametags

### Welcome and Opening Check-In (30 min.)

*Welcome participants and thank them for coming.*

Make sure that everyone knows where to find restrooms, water fountains, and other necessities. Encourage people to share their accessibility needs now or throughout the program. Introduce yourself and the program, offering time for questions. Circulate a sheet of paper so that people can write down contact information for your records.

*Light the Chalice.*

Share reading #665 from the UUA Hymnal (*Singing the Living Tradition*), or another reading of your choosing. Allow a short time of silence before continuing.

*Explain to participants that before you begin, you would like the group to establish ground rules.*

Tell them that ground rules are used to make a safe space for personal sharing. Ask a volunteer to record the group's suggested guidelines on newsprint. If certain rules you find important are not mentioned, suggest them yourself (see "Getting Started" for common ground rules). Once the group has finished

brainstorming ideas, check to make sure that everyone is comfortable with the ground rules. Ask participants if they are willing to enter into a covenant to abide by the rules they have created. If this is already a covenant group, or a group that meets regularly outside of this particular series, take this time to review your current ground rules and see if the group wishes to change them in any way.

*Tell participants that every session will begin with a check-in.*

Ask that the sharing go around the circle, with people offering a brief description of how they are doing. If the program is scheduled right after a busy time of day you may want to suggest a theme for the check-in, to help people make the transition to group work. For this first session, ask that participants introduce themselves and state their expectations for the program. Make sure that everyone has a nametag. Possible ideas for check-in themes include:

- sharing an image from Sanders' essays that particularly moved you;
- sharing a short memory that came to mind when reading *The Force of Spirit*;
- sharing a brief reflection from your journaling; or
- sharing a snapshot from your day that could be transformed into a reflective essay.

### **Small Group Discussion: Why This Moment?** (15 min.)

*Separate into groups of 2 or 3 people. Allow each person about 5 minutes to share.*

Scott Russell Sanders describes the moment of turning 50 in the year 2000 as a time when it became impossible for him to ignore the fundamental questions of life. For him it was the entering of a new millennium, starting his second half-century, having his children leave the house and marry, and experiencing deaths in the family that ignited the fire of inquiry in him. What is it about this time in your life that encouraged you to enter into this discussion series?

### **Large Group Sharing: Who Are We and Why Are We Here?** (25 min.)

What were the common themes that presented themselves in your small groups? Were these themes also found in the weaving of Sanders' essays? Are there specific types of life events; liminal periods such as births, coming of age, marriages, and deaths; or concerns that most promote spiritual reflection? What are the main questions inspired by life? (*Refer to Sanders' list on the top of p. 2 if there is a lag in the conversation.*)

### **Break** (5 min.)

*Invite participants to take 5 minutes to stretch, get refreshments, and use the bathrooms.*

### **Writing Exercise: Reflecting on Something Larger than Ourselves** (30 min.)

In his first essay, "*The Force of Spirit*," Sanders writes:

I want a name for the force that keeps Earl McClure asking questions while the tide of life withdraws from him....This power is larger than life, although it contains life. It's tougher than love, although it contains love....I recognize this

force at work in children puzzling over a new fact, in grown-ups welcoming strangers, in our capacity, young and old, for laughter and kindness, for mercy and imagination. (pp. 14-15)

Sanders knows that he may upset both theists and nontheists with his words. And yet he states, "I must run those risks, for I cannot understand the world, cannot understand my life, without appealing to the force of spirit." (p. 15)

Ask the group to spend about 10 minutes journaling. Tell people that they will be invited to share, but that they will not be required to. Use the quotations above to introduce this topic to the participants. Think about the question of your ultimate concern—your idea of the force (or forces) that drives us to examine the questions of life. Write a brief reflection on your feelings and ideas, and how they have evolved with time.

*After the writing, invite people to read a part of their journal entry aloud. They can also share what came up for them without reading aloud, if they prefer. Remind the group that their writing need not be perfect. Sanders' prose is a challenging example of beautiful writing.*

### **Reflection on the Session** (10 min.)

*Encourage participants to go around the circle and offer a few sentences on how this session was for them.*

What was particularly moving? What was challenging? Is there anything that the group should bear in mind for the next meeting?

### **Closing Reading**

*Thank the participants for their presence and participation. Close with reading #700 from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or with another reading of your choosing.*

*Extinguish the chalice. Ask for volunteers to help restore the room to its original state.*

## SESSION TWO

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**Materials:** Newsprint, markers, masking tape, chalice, candle, matches, UUA Hymnal (*Singing the Living Tradition*, Boston: UUA, 1993), paper, pens

### **Chalice Lighting and Check-In** (15 min.)

*To open this session, light the chalice and read #528 from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or another selection of your choosing. Allow a short time of silence before continuing.*

After the reading, ask people to go around the circle and share briefly. Have people check-in quickly and if they wish, invite them to share a moment when they learned something from hearing another's story since the last session.

### **Small Group Discussions** (45 min.)

*Let participants know that they will be meeting in small groups for three fifteen-minute sessions, sharing personal stories with one another. Tell them that a break will follow the three sessions. Encourage participants to meet with different people in each mini-session in order to have a chance to share with most of the group.*

#### **SMALL GROUP 1: THE INTERDEPENDENT WEB OF ALL EXISTENCE** (15 min.)

Sanders' essays are rich with natural imagery, and lessons are gained through time spent in nature. He uses nature to illustrate life, death, memory, spirit and social justice.

*Separate into groups of 2 or 3 people.*

Ask participants to spend five minutes each sharing a story from their lives that illustrates something they learned from the natural world, or an understanding of our seventh principle (Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part) that is meaningful to them.

#### **SMALL GROUP 2: RELATIONSHIPS** (15 min.)

Sanders takes us on a journey where we celebrate and commemorate relationships with others through life experiences. In *The Force of Spirit*, he writes of parenting, being parented, marriage and teaching. He illustrates how those relationships shape us, defining who we are and

what we can become.

*Separate into groups of 2 or 3 people.*

Ask people to group with participants who were not in their first small group. Invite them to spend five minutes each sharing a story from their lives that illustrates a deepening of a relationship and how they were changed by that connection.

### **SMALL GROUP 3: DEATH AND LOSS (15 min.)**

Sanders blesses us with beautifully intense writing on his experiences with death and the questions raised by those events.

*Separate into groups of 2 or 3 people.*

Ask participants to vary their groups yet again. Invite them to spend five minutes each sharing a story from their lives that deals with death, dying or loss. Their stories can also focus on the memory of someone they have lost.

### **Break (5 min.)**

*Invite participants to take 5 minutes to stretch, get refreshments, and use the bathrooms. Let them use this time to prepare themselves to return to the larger group for processing.*

### **Large Group Discussion: Sharing Our Stories (30 min.)**

In “*The Power of Stories*,” Sanders gives us ten reasons for telling stories:

They entertain us. They create community. They help us to see through the eyes of other people. They show us the consequences of our actions. They educate our desires. Stories help us to dwell in place. They help us to dwell in time. They help us to deal with suffering, loss, and death. They teach us how to be human. And stories acknowledge the wonder and mystery of Creation. (p. 85)

How did it feel to hear the stories of the other members of your small groups? What was it like to open windows on your life to other people? How did the stories shared illustrate our grappling with the ultimate questions of life? What is the importance of sharing our stories,

and how can we work personal sharing into the ministry of our broader community?

### **Preparing for the Next Session (10 min.)**

*Tell the group that the next session will be a cooperative project to prepare a worship service for the wider community that focuses on life stories as tools for wrestling with spirituality.*

Ask them to think about the last two sessions, and how they could share some of what they have accomplished with the larger congregation (if the group is made up of members of multiple congregations, ask them if they would be willing to offer the service at each church). Encourage participants to include in their journal any thoughts on readings, hymns and overall structure that occur to them before your next meeting.

### **Reflection on the Session (10 min.)**

*Encourage participants to go around the circle and each offer a few sentences on how this session was for them.*

What was particularly moving? What was challenging? Is there anything that the group should bear in mind for the next meeting?

### **Closing**

*Close with reading #680 from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or with another reading selection of your choosing.*

*Extinguish the chalice. Ask for volunteers to help restore the room to its original state.*

## SESSION THREE

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**Materials:** Newsprint, markers, masking tape, chalice, candle, matches, UUA Hymnal (*Singing the Living Tradition*, Boston: UUA, 1993), paper, pens, photocopies of the Participant Evaluation Form

### **Chalice Lighting and Check-In** (15 min.)

*To open this session, light the chalice and share reading #529 from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or another selection of your choosing. Allow a short time of silence before continuing.*

After the reading, ask people to go around the circle and share briefly. Have participants check-in quickly and if they wish, invite them to share a short description of a moment in worship that for them was profound.

### **Large Group Discussion: The Worship Experience** (30 min.)

In his final essay, "Silence," Sanders offers a snapshot of worship that for him is transformational. He writes,

I often yearn, as I did that morning, to withdraw from all our schemes and formulas, to escape from the obsessive human story, to slip out of my own small self and meet the great Self, the nameless mystery at the core of being. (p. 159)

What are the components of worship that are transformational for you? How could we best address the issues that we have been exploring in a worship service? Is there a way that, through the usage of story, we could provide a setting for an exploration of spirituality for the wider congregation?

### **Break** (5 min.)

*Invite participants to take 5 minutes to stretch, get refreshments, and use the bathrooms.*

### **Focus Groups: The Components of Worship** (20 min.)

*Split into groups of 2 to 3 people.*

Ask participants to choose a focus group (readings, music or message) based on their interests and their journaling since the last session. Using the themes and ideas brought up in the large group, gather ideas about readings, music or the message for a worship service. For the message, suggest using a mélange of voices, a blending of stories to best illustrate the themes and ideas of the group. Remind participants that a worship service does not require that a single person preach from the pulpit.

### **Weaving the Worship** (30 min.)

*Return to the larger group, and begin by having participants share the work of the focus groups.*

You will most likely find that the work of the focus groups blends well together. Use this time to finesse the service, giving it an order, and utilizing a standard order of service from your church to help the group with worship structure. The group may need to meet again outside of the discussion program to finalize their work. Suggest a meeting with the minister or Worship Committee before the order of service is finalized.

### **Reflection on the Series** (15 min.)

*Encourage participants to go around the circle and offer a few sentences on their feelings about the program.*

What was particularly moving? What was challenging? Is there any feedback that they would offer for improvements to the program overall?

*Use this time to ask people to fill out their participant evaluation forms.*

### **Closing**

*Close with reading #680 from the UUA Hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition) or with another reading selection of your choosing.*

*Extinguish the chalice. Thank participants for their sharing, enthusiasm and participation. Ask for volunteers to help restore the room to its original state.*

**For further reading we recommend the following Beacon books:**

*Come as You Are: Reflections on the Revelations of Everyday Life*, by G. Peter Fleck  
*The Miracle of Mindfulness*, by Thich Nhat Hahn  
*A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, by John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church  
*The Pleasure of Their Company*,  
by Doris Grumbach

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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# BEACON PRESS DISCUSSION GUIDES

## Participant Evaluation Form

Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Group Leader: \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please indicate your evaluation of the following:*

<b>meeting space</b>	poor	fair	okay	good	great
<b>pacing</b>	poor	fair	okay	good	great
<b>content</b>	poor	fair	okay	good	great
<b>overall</b>	poor	fair	okay	good	great

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1. Do you think the sessions were: (Please check one)

\_\_\_\_too long                      \_\_\_\_about right                      \_\_\_\_too short

How long would you like the sessions to be? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you think there were: (Please check one)

\_\_\_\_too many sessions      \_\_\_\_the right number of sessions      \_\_\_\_too few sessions

If you thought there were too many sessions, which one(s) would you leave out?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. If your large group broke into smaller groups for discussion, did this process work? Why or why not?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Is there anything that you would like to have talked about that was not included in the sessions? If so, what? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. What activity(ies) did you especially like? Why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. If there was an activity that you feel did not work in this context, can you tell us which activity and why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Question: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Question: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Please rate your group leader's skills in leading the session(s): (Circle one)  
Excellent            Good            Average            Fair            Poor

10. What suggestions would you offer to the group leader to improve the way the group is conducted? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you very much for taking the time to give us your feedback! Please return your completed form to: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# BEACON PRESS DISCUSSION GUIDES

## Leader Evaluation Form

Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

UU Society: \_\_\_\_\_ District: \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you and/or your participants think the sessions were: (Please check one)

\_\_\_\_ too long                      \_\_\_\_ about right                      \_\_\_\_ too short

How long would you like the sessions to be? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Do you think that there were: (Please check one)

\_\_\_\_ too many sessions      \_\_\_\_ the right number of sessions      \_\_\_\_ too few sessions

If you thought there were too many sessions, which ones would you leave out?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. If your large group broke into smaller groups for discussion, did this process work?

Why or why not?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Is there anything that you would like to have talked about that was not included in the sessions? If so, what?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. What activity(ies) did you especially like and why?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. If there was an activity that you feel did not work in this context, can you tell us which activity and why?

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7. Do you think the discussion guides will help to promote a stronger sense of community in your congregation? Why or why not?

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8. Can you suggest other books or subjects that might work in this context?

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9. If you changed the format, please describe the changes you made and your reason for making them.

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*Thank you for taking the time to give us your feedback!*

**Please return this form to:**

Helene Atwan, Director  
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for Good in the Twenty-First Century*

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