

## Introduction to the Curriculum

### Universal Connection

#### A Love Beyond Belief™ Experience with

The Rev. Dr. Thandeka

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### Introduction

Americans are a lonely people. According to a January [2020 survey](#) of 10,000 Americans, 61% of adults over 18 say they are lonely. That's three out of five persons. Most Americans felt physically isolated, lacked social support systems and had few meaningful social interactions *before* the shelter-in-place Covid-19 protocols began. On the *Hidden Brain* podcast *A Social Prescription*, Vivek Murthy, current Surgeon General of the United States, states "Studies done by Julianne Holt-Lunstad from Brigham Young University have demonstrated that there is an association between loneliness and a shortening of lifespan. And the amount of the shortening or the mortality impact seems to be similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than the mortality impact that you see from obesity or sedentary living.... Chronic loneliness causes stress that can ultimately lead to higher levels of inflammation in our body and increase our risk for chronic illnesses like heart disease.... Loneliness contributes to the rise of addiction and violence."

Small groups of six to twelve persons, namely, micro-communities, can end this epidemic of loneliness by sharing discoveries of true-self journeys with one another. The experiences will be a spiritual-but-not-religious small group movement for Americans who aren't religious and a spiritual-religious-small group movement for Americans who are religious. Both kinds of small groups have the same structure, so religious and non-religious persons can be members of the same group.

Universal Connection is a once-a-week, four-week course to introduce participants to the practices of true-self journeys and sharing discoveries with one another; thereby experiencing the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. At the end of the course participants are encouraged to form their own small groups to maintain the practice of universal connection in their lives. These small groups are called Love Beyond Belief™ Groups because the feeling of loneliness gives way to the feeling of being part of a caring community that not only affirms your inherent worth and dignity, but also cherishes you.

#### I. Course Description

This four-week course is designed as a spiritual practice that deepens connections with your true-self, the Universe and others. Each class session becomes an access point for nurturing connections and generating insights, reflections and actions guided by compassion.

In this course you not only learn how to recall experiences of feeling loved beyond belief, but you also create new experiences of feeling unconditional love as an ongoing reality in your life.

This course is for humanists, theists, atheists, artists, educators, businesspersons, doctors and scientists, poets and mystics, and all who seek connection, meaningful relationships and an expanded way of being compassionate in the world.

Protocols:

- Recounting personal narratives
- Learning through shared stories and reflections
- Respecting and honoring personal experiences
- Creating a covenantal community of trust and care
- Practicing compassionate engagement with oneself and others

**II. Course Goals**

Participants will have greater access to the rejuvenating, spiritual realm of their bodies and minds. They will explore a mode of consciousness that has been called the authentic self and the true self. Participants will be able to define what the term *spirituality* means in their own personal non-religious or religious terms. Participants will also become better listeners.

**III. Course Outcomes**

Persons who take this course will have the experiential foundation and develop the mental clarity requisite for a spiritual life that helps them always feel loved and cared for. This mode of consciousness frees persons to feel gratitude and joy in uplifting ways that can prompt acts of lovingkindness in the world. Participants in this course can join with others in the class and create Love Beyond Belief small groups (six to twelve persons each) to continue their work together after this four-part weekly series of class sessions ends.

This course thus creates what it teaches: Love Beyond Belief™ small groups. It also serves as the first step in training facilitators, teachers, and organizers who want to use small group community-building processes to deepen connections that heal and transform the world.

**IV. Course Objectives**

The goals of this course will be achieved by:

- Paying attention to the longings of your own heart with compassion rather than judgment.
- Listening to others with care and compassion.
- Practicing nonjudgmental awareness.
- Establishing within yourself an ongoing sense of gratitude and appreciation that prompts acts of lovingkindness toward yourself and others as foundational building blocks for creating nurturing communities that together can heal and transform the world.

## V. Course Covenant

Persons in this course agree to abide by a Group Covenant. The goal of the Covenant is to establish a set of ground rules that create an environment where all feel comfortable to share their true selves with the group.

Essential components:

- Participation takes place “popcorn style” so that no one feels pressured to speak. We honor each other’s sense of privacy.
- Share from personal experience, feelings and thoughts: We will use “I” statements and share stories from our own lives.
- Welcome silences: After someone has spoken, we will pause without filling the space with words.
- Share the time and attention of the group equally and respectfully: We will listen as deeply as we share.
- No fixing: Each of us is here to take our own journey with group support as a community practice. We will refrain from making “fixing” suggestions to others unless invited.
- Do not gossip or tell other people’s stories, both within the group and outside the group.
- Any reference to harm to self or others, when disclosed in these groups, will be referred to professionals.
- Start on time – End on time: We honor each other’s time and commitment.