

Course ID:
SKSM.07FA.SKSL.103
Instructor:
Helen Bishop

Systems Thinking for Unitarian Universalist Laity

This course is designed to promote understanding among Unitarian Universalist lay leaders of how organizations operate on the systems level. "Systems thinking" is a methodology linking understandings of how individuals, dyads, small groups and large groups of people interact with the structure, policies, practices, and culture of an organization. Participants will read materials on various aspects of organizational life, analyze and prepare organizational diagrams, examine the ways in which components interact, analyze case studies for evidence of organizational frames, and prepare a case study of a nonprofit organization demonstrating systems thinking. The course is 14 weeks long. Each of the 14 units includes assigned readings and bibliography of reference materials. Each unit includes a lecture by the instructor designed to support and illustrate the reading assignments as well as encouraging dialogue. The course will include two required on-line chat sessions.

Students will log in periodically throughout the week to post assignments, review materials posted by other students, and participate actively in an ongoing discussion. Students are encouraged to engage with the course materials and each other, creating a learning community as the course progresses.

Book list

Please note that all titles with the exception of Helen Bishop's monograph are available through www.amazon.com, or other on-line booksellers such as Powells, Borders, and Barnes & Noble. The monograph can be ordered from Shannon Hawkins, the Liberal Religious Educators Association administrator, for a cost of \$10 plus postage. Contact Shannon using her email address, ShannonLREDA@satx.rr.com, or at PO Box 691254, San Antonio TX 78269.

Bishop, Helen (2001). "Professional Matters." A monograph available from the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA).

- Oshry, Barry (1999). Leading Systems. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. ISBN 1-57675-072-8.
- Oshry, Barry (1996). Seeing Systems. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. ISBN 1-881052-99-0.
- Senge, Peter (1990). The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. New York: Doubleday. ISBN 0-385-26095-4.
- Steinke, Peter (2006). Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. ISBN 1-56699-328-8.
- Steinke, Peter (1996). Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach. Washington, DC: Alban Institute.

Weekly topics and assignments

Week 1 - Introduction to systems thinking
Sept 4 - 9

- Bishop, Helen (2001). *Professional Matters.* " A monograph available through The Liberal Religious Educators Association (Shannon Hawkins, LREDA Administrator, ShannonLREDA@satx.rr.com, \$10 plus postage)
- Oshry, Barry (1996). *Seeing Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 1 - 52.
- Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 1 - 22.

"Systems thinking" involves a "big picture" perspective as well as personal knowledge and insight. People begin to acquire systems thinking in their earliest interactions with those who provide care, nourishment, and an introduction to life on Earth. They enter an existing system in which adults encourage some things and discourage others, and in which other children have already established their own roles, inside and outside the family of origin. The setting in which a child grows up is located within a neighborhood, a community, a nation, a region, and the world itself. Students will begin to acquire systems thinking through two avenues: family systems theory and organizational systems theory. They will also post short

bios and digital photos of themselves, and share their learning goals for this course.

Week 2- Systems thinking and healthy congregations

Sept 10 - 16

Oshry, Barry (1996). *Seeing Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 53 - 130.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 1 - 56.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 23 - 37.

According to Peter Senge, people in learning organizations utilize the concept of "metanoia," meaning "a shift of mind." Learning organizations expand their capacities to create the future, and given the level of uncertainty we're dealing with at the beginning of the 21st century, our minds need to shift in the direction of systems thinking and the tools of personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning. Students this week will examine the attributes of what Peter Steinke calls a "healthy congregation," and will construct and share genograms of the congregations or organizations on which they've decided to focus.

Week 3 - Systems diagrams, and how Tops, Middles, Bottoms and Customers Behave in congregations and organizations

Sept 17 - 23

Oshry, Barry (1996). *Seeing Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 131 - 174.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 57 - 92.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 38 - 53.

Students will learn how to read a systems diagram, and assess the focus of the congregations or organizations on which they've decided to focus. They'll describe how Tops, Middles, Bottoms and Customers are behaving in

that congregation or organization, and share their observations with one another.

Week 4 - The role of power in moving toward differentiation in relationship
Sept 24 - 30

Oshry, Barry (1996). *Seeing Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 175 - 204.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 139 - 173.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 54 - 77.

Students will learn how anxiety can move people back into their reptilian brains, make decisions about personal mastery, and assess the role power can play in moving individuals and organizations toward differentiation in relationship.

Week 5 - Systems thinking and mental models
Oct 1 - 7

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems: Lessons from the Power Lab*. San Diego: Berrett-Koehler. 1 - 53.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 174 - 204.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 78 - 100.

Students will analyze the mental models they use to make assessments and decisions about common organizational situations. They will analyze a case study to explore ways in which people who focus on differentiation in themselves can influence an organization in the direction of health.

Week 6 - Shared vision and organizational health
Oct 8 - 14

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems: Lessons from the Power Lab*. San Diego: Berrett-Koehler. 56 - 108.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 205 - 232.
Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 101 - 109.

Students will analyze the genograms they prepared earlier in the course to find examples of systemic forces that influence a congregation or organization in the direction of health and strength. They will find examples from their own congregations or organizations of shared vision, and describe ways of using systems thinking from inside and outside an organization.

Week 7 - Using NAPS and LAPS to create robust human systems
Oct 15 - 21

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 109 - 142.
Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 233 - 269.
Steinke, Peter (2006). *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 1 - 46.

Students will analyze a case study for examples of "non-anxious presence" or "less-anxious presence," taking a NAP or a LAP. They will describe how teams in their own congregations or organizations demonstrate team learning, and create a description of a robust human system.

Reading week
Oct 22 - 28

Students may wish to catch up on reading and assignments, or work on the final short (two-page) paper

Week 8 - Influencing robust human systems
Oct 29 - Nov 4

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 143 - 158.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 339 - 360.

Steinke, Peter (2006). *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 47 - 96.

Students will describe examples of leaders in their congregations or organizations who use systems thinking to influence people inside and outside the organization.

Week 9 - "I" and "Us"
Nov 5 - Nov 11

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 159 - 189.

Steinke, Peter (2006). *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 97 - 118.

Students will examine the role of the "Other" in systems, and describe changes in behavior patterns that facilitate systemic change with regard to "differences."

Week 10 - Rocking the boat
Nov 12 - 18

Steinke, Peter (2006). *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 119 - 175.

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated

Students will analyze a case study for examples of ways in which leaders use systems thinking to challenge an existing system that needs to change adaptively. They will also begin to explore the system of congregations, districts and the Unitarian Universalist Association, or the system in which a nonprofit organization functions in relation to an associational network.

Week 11 - Values and systems thinking
Nov 19 - 25

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated
Heifetz, Ronald A. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1 - 66.

Students will describe the values they prioritize highly in relation to the systems within which they function, and will analyze how those values are made manifest in those systems, including the Unitarian Universalist Association, or the system in which a nonprofit organization functions in relation to an associational network.

Week 12 - Systems thinking and adaptive work
Nov 26 - Dec 2

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated
Heifetz, Ronald A. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 67 - 180.

Students will use the concept of "adaptive work" to describe ways in which leaders can influence systems to change in response to changes in their environments. The systems in question will include the Unitarian Universalist Association, or the system in which a nonprofit organization functions in relation to an associational network.

Week 13 - Systems thinking and the role of authority
Dec 3 - 9

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated
Heifetz, Ronald A. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 181 - 232.

Students will describe ways in which they can use systems thinking to influence a system to change, whether or not they are in a position of

authority. The systems in question will include the Unitarian Universalist Association, or the system in which a nonprofit organization functions in relation to an associational network.

Week 14 - Systems thinking and personal challenges
Dec 10 - 16

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated
Heifetz, Ronald A. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 233 - 276.

Students will use systems thinking to describe situations in which personal challenges must be met for the system to survive. The systems in question will include the Unitarian Universalist Association, or the system in which a nonprofit organization functions in relation to an associational network.

In closing:

Peter Steinke wrote, "You are not asked to pull hope out of the thin air or to pump up your courage like a coach would inspire the team. You are not promised solutions. Instead, you are invited to have your strength renewed." Barry Oshry wrote, "We can strive to create systems in which we develop, respect, and encourage our individuality and our community, our diversity and our commonality." Ronald Heifetz wrote, "The adaptive demands of our societies require leadership that takes responsibility without waiting for revelation or request." And Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Meg Barnhouse used the words of Julian of Norwich to sing "All will be well, and all will be well. All manner of things will be well." May we acquire and use systems thinking to let it be so