Effective Study Group Leadership: Lighting the Way

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Introduction

There was a young man walking down a street one day who saw three people struggling with a piano in a doorway. The piano was wedged tightly, and the three couldn't move it. Being a good Samaritan, the young man pitched in to help. A half hour later, he paused, mopped his perspiring brow, and said, "I don't know if we'll ever get this thing out of this building." The other three looked at him and said, "What do you mean out?"

This little story illustrates a point that is made in Paper 81:

Ten men are of little more value than one in lifting a great load unless they lift together -- all at the same moment. 81:6.37

But *The Urantia Book* also describes what can happen when people do work together:

…in dealing with human personality it would be nearer the truth to say that such a personality association is a sum equal to the square of the number of personalities concerned in the equation rather than the simple arithmetical sum. A social group of human beings in co-ordinated working harmony stands for a force far greater than the simple sum of its parts. 133:5.6

The Urantia Revelation needs our groups and our group leaders to function as well as they can if we are to prosper.

We are all dedicated to improving and to growing the number of *Urantia Book* study groups. Like you I want yearn to enhance my study groups' spirituality, to maintain or improve our quality of study, and to create more stability and community. We are always concerned about our numbers and our future, and we can all always improve what we do. I'm often reminded of an image from a recent political campaign, the vision of comparing the doing of good things to "1,000 points of light." This is one way that I see our need to maintain, improve, and create study groups. To me creating real, valid groups that study *The Urantia Book,* is simply logical, and it is imperative that we not only seek to create new groups but that we continue to try to enhance and not to give up on any groups that already exist. Once we ignite one of those lights, we need to keep it burning!

If our Urantia groups are to burst forward with new vigor and success, these groups must depend very much on their leadership. Let's enlarge on the first quotation we read:

In civilization much, very much, depends on an enthusiastic and effective load-pulling spirit. Ten men are of little more value than one in lifting a great load unless they lift together — all at the same moment. And such teamwork — social co-operation — is dependent on leadership. The cultural civilizations of the past and the present have been based upon the intelligent co-operation of the citizenry with wise and progressive leaders; and until man evolves to higher levels, civilization will continue to be dependent on wise and vigorous leadership. 81:6.37

That "wise and vigorous leadership" must understand what issues they will address and how they will address them. I believe that three major concerns that study groups face are the needs for increased but real spirituality within our groups, improved study of *The Urantia Book,* and greater attention paid to improving our sense of community. Wise and vigorous leadership will consider how to gracefully and appropriately enhance prayer and worship, effective study, and strong relationships within their groups.

Enhancing Spirituality Within Our Groups

The Urantia Book makes clear the value of group prayer and worship, and a significant matter for leaders to contemplate is how to fairly and appropriately enhance their groups' approaches to prayer and worship.

Bill Sadler said "*The Urantia Book* is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end." I think Bill gets credit for this idea because he may have been the first to write it down. I've actually heard this idea many times and said it myself. It should be obvious; after all, the physical reality of *The Urantia Book* is nothing more than processed wood containing black abstract symbols on a white page that must be translated into words and then into ideas and then turned into facts, knowledge, meaning, and values. If applied, these values can eventually lead to relationships between personalities, including between us and God: finally, ends in themselves. So actually the book is a means to a means to a means to--well, you get the idea--to an end.

Some of our most important goals or ends are clearly stated in the oft-quoted passage from the paper "Personality Survival":

Everything nonspiritual in human experience, excepting personality, is a means to an end. Every true relationship of mortal man with other persons — human or divine — is an end in itself. 112:2.8

We are also told that *"Spiritual experience is the real soul of man's cosmos."* 102:4.6

Although *The Urantia Book* strongly emphasizes our personal relationship with God as our most important spiritual activity, the book also encourages us to include prayer and worship within our groups.

... prayer need not always be individual. Group or congregational praying is very effective in that it is highly socializing in its repercussions. When a group engages in community prayer for moral enhancement and spiritual uplift, such devotions are reactive upon the individuals composing the group; they are all made better because of participation. 91:5.2

I've recently heard discussed the importance of bringing more spirituality into our study groups; in truth, this is something that many readers have suggested for many years. That desire for some exists is probably not surprising. Historically, early readers sought to avoid turning our study of *The Urantia Book* into a church, perhaps because of their own experiences, perhaps because they wanted to avoid any sort of authoritative interpretation or ecclesiastical hierarchy. The atmosphere of a study group may not lead to worship and prayer as readily as does that of a church or temple wherein rituals and prescribed approaches to worship exist in buildings

designed for that purpose. However, *The Urantia Book* clearly suggests that we benefit from group prayer, thankfulness, and worship.

Thus does the mind of one augment its spiritual values by gaining much of the insight of the other. In this way men enrich the soul by pooling their respective spiritual possessions. 160:2.7

Yet how we bring our spiritual communion into a group can be a delicate undertaking and represents a challenge for study group leaders. One group I was in debated the proposal for a mandated prayer to start each meeting, while others wanted only a moment of silence, and others wanted no prayer at all. We ended by making it voluntary for the leader of each meeting. Many sincere readers are quite uncomfortable with group devotions, whether due to form, to being asked to engage in an activity that is personally uncomfortable, to one's own religious background, to a discomfort with an approach that feels mystical, or to myriad other reasons. We must be mindful of the sensibilities of group members if they are to remain group members. Consequently, it is also important that the group has a strong understanding of what *The Urantia Book* teaches us about our spiritual communions.

There are many references about effective and ethical prayer which include both what not to do as well as what are genuine approaches.

Do not be so slothful as to ask God to solve your difficulties, but never hesitate to ask him for wisdom and spiritual strength to guide and sustain you while you yourself resolutely and courageously attack the problems at hand. ***91:6.5***

Prayer may not be employed to avoid the delays of time or to transcend the handicaps of space. ***146:2.9***

Prayer must never be so prostituted as to become a substitute for action. ***91:4.2***

True praying is the sincere attitude of reaching heavenward for the attainment of your ideals. ***144:2.2***

In all your praying be fair; do not expect God to show partiality, to love you more than his other children, your friends, neighbors, even enemies. ***91:4.3***

*Remember, even if prayer does not change God, it very often effects great and lasting changes in the one who prays….****91:4.5***

The Urantia Book also warns of certain kinds of mysticism:
Mysticism… is often something of a retreat from life which is embraced by those humans who do not relish the more robust activities of living a religious life in the open arenas of human society and commerce. True religion must act. ***102:2.8***
When prayer becomes overmuch aesthetic…, it loses much of its socializing influence and ends toward mysticism and the isolation of its devotees. There is a certain danger associated with overmuch private praying which is corrected and prevented by group praying, community devotions. **91:7.13**

Study group leaders also can conside what *The Urantia Book* says about our actual working relationships with our Thought Adjusters as they try to make their groups' prayer and worship practices valid and attractive:

Every decision you make either impedes or facilitates the function of the Adjuster… ***110:6.6***

*You must not regard co-operation with your Adjuster as a particularly conscious process, for it is not…****110:3.6***

While the voice of the Adjuster is ever within you, most of you will hear it seldom during a lifetime. ***110:7.9***

… it is dangerous to entertain the idea that every new concept originating in the human mind is the dictation of the Adjuster. More often, in beings of your order, that which you accept as the Adjuster's voice is in reality the emanation of your own intellect. ***110:5.6***

It is difficult to fully please every member of the group when it comes to instilling group practices of prayer and worship. However, group leaders at least might include the welfare of their groups when they are praying and worshiping individually. Remember the book's suggestions for "worshipful problem solving," a consistent habit of Jesus.

Improving Study

Enhancing spirituality in our study groups may be paramount. But if we are to use the book to grow spiritually, then we also must study *The Urantia Book* effectively to enhance our spiritual lives.

Our spiritual growth and our relationships are our true ends; studying the teachings of *The Urantia Book* is a means to those ends.

We do not need *The Urantia Book* to find God, who loves us, is within us, and is available to anyone who seeks him and has faith in him; nevertheless,*The Urantia Book,* the Fifth Epochal Revelation of Truth on Urantia, is a magnificent resource that helps us to find God and to better understand who we are, why we are here, and where we are going. At least it can be such an aid if we study it deeply and then sincerely try to incorporate its teachings into our lives. The fact that this revelation is presented in book form certainly tells us that the revelators want us to use our minds and use them well.

Thus, one of the most important tasks that study group leaders can do is to help readers better understand *The Urantia Book*. Improved comprehension through stronger study should be one of our highest priorities.

Several references support this idea:

The divine spirit makes contact with mortal man, not by feelings or emotions, but in the realm of the highest and most spiritualized thinking. It is your thoughts, *not your feelings, that lead you Godward.* 101:1.3

Material mind is the arena in which human personalities live, are self-conscious, make decisions, choose God or forsake him, eternalize or destroy themselves. **111:1.3**

… to start such a magnificent and intriguing adventure through space by means of the progression of time, [mortal man] should begin by the organization of knowledge into idea-decisions; next, mandate wisdom to labor unremittingly at its noble task of transforming self-possessed ideas into increasingly practical but nonetheless supernal ideals, even those concepts which are so reasonable as ideas and so logical as ideals that the Adjuster dares so to combine and spiritize them as to render them available for such association in the finite mind …. 101:6.7

The primary mission of Michael's bestowal on Urantia was that of God knowing man, of the Creator Son of Nebadon enhancing his comprehension of and empathy for his creatures. Jesus' education while on earth was supreme, and he learned all that he could about human beings even while he loved them, he worked in many professions and became expert in several, he traveled where he could throughout the civilized world, and he was a scholar of religion and history and anything else he could learn.

Regarding Jesus' approach to his life-long learning, we are told that:

As a child [Jesus] accumulated a vast body of knowledge; as a youth he sorted, classified, and correlated this information; and now as a man of the realm he begins to organize these mental possessions preparatory to utilization in his subsequent teaching, ministry, and service …. 127:6.14

The teachings of Jesus constituted the first Urantian religion which so fully embraced a harmonious co-ordination of knowledge, wisdom, faith, truth, and love... 101:6.8

Like Jesus, a major task of our Urantia careers is to learn all that we can about others and about the world around us. I would suggest that not only do we want to study *The Urantia Book* as well as we can in our study groups, we also want to educate ourselves individually about other subjects as well. I am an English and music teacher, but I believe that, after everything we study for our vocations and our interests, some primary intellectual pursuits are history and then integrating all that we learn. We are told that:

Revealed religion is the unifying element of human existence. Revelation unifies history, co-ordinates geology, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, and psychology. 102:4.6.

At first life was a struggle for existence; now, for a standard of living; next it will be for quality of thinking, the coming earthly goal of human existence. 81:6.28.

It is the purpose of education to develop and sharpen these innate endowments of the human mind; of civilization to express them; of life experience to realize them; of religion to ennoble them; and of personality to unify them. 16:6.11.

How To Study More Effectively I know many of you belong to study groups which study the book well. I have been fortunate to belong to study groups in Chicago which have sincere and dedicated readers. Nevertheless, we continue to look for ways to understand *The Urantia Book* better. For example, we have always had prepared leaders and a program. But we've innovated lately. This included an entire year spent on "The Foreword" as we began our fifth sequential reading through the book since 1956. Another group has adapted what we call "Paper Topicals" instead of sequential reading; these require a focus but less preparation for the leader than would a conference workshop. I know of several groups that require homework and preparation. But I also know from observation and from the descriptions I've been told of many groups that deeper study of the book is often needed if members are to get more from reading the book.

There are many ways to approach studying *The Urantia Book* effectively, and variety is one of them. Many people enjoy reading *The Urantia Book* sequentially, and the book assuredly can be studied in-depth in that format. But whether reading sequentially or not, leaders also might implement some of these approaches:

- Use outside references that do not compromise the central purpose of studying *The Urantia Book;* these resources include having an excellent dictionary with etymologies, good atlases, and other reference books; literature and history books can often be used; The Bible and other sacred books, when relevant, are helpful; and, of course, study aids for *The Urantia Book,* whether print or electronic, should be readily available.
- Delve deeply into the book, even when it's difficult, even when you've just been told by a Divine Counselor that he doesn't get it, either. Everything is there is for a purpose, and even if we can't reach a final answer on the topic we are discussing, we expand our perspectives when we study and discuss these difficult ideas.
- Instead of feeling that you've wasted time when that oft-repeated phenomenon of finding your discussion addressed in the next paragraph occurs, rejoice when this happens! Notice that it doesn't happen as often, if at all, when reading alone; it happens because good discussion has opened up a topic. This is substantiation of the exquisite integrational techniques of the writing of *The Urantia Book,* of the power and need for discussion, and of the beauty of good questioning techniques.
- Through the use of the rotating moderator, give everyone a chance to speak and read if they wish. Don't let quickness or a dominating personality squash those who are quieter or less aggressive. As an English teacher, I strongly urge the raising of hands, even if the group contains only four or more people. I like to tell the story of the class I observed when I was getting my master's degree. I watched the English class of Mr. H, a very bright, sincere, and gentle soul. There were only 11 students in the class, and Mr. H didn't require raised hands. For my project, I was to keep track of each student's activities in this discussion format on a minute-to-minute basis for five class periods. To hear and watch this class, one would think it extraordinarily quiet and respectful. But at week's end my statistics showed that one student, Ben, had made more than 90% of the comments because of his alert, interested, rapid-fire, but not necessarily perceptive personality. Two other students had said almost everything else, and the other eight students said virtually nothing all week except when whispering to each other.
- Attend to physical issues that can help or inhibit a good study meeting, such as having plenty of copies of the book available, staying on time, and having comfortable seating so

that everyone can see each other: when we welcome our unseen friends, that is not supposed to include George who is crammed into the alcove around the corner.

- Try different study and educational approaches. One place you can start is by perusing the document "Prime Education Quotations by Category," an eighteen-page list of references of what *The Urantia Book* says about education and teaching.

I do not believe we should ever apologize for seeking to improve the quality of thought in our study groups; what we also need to do is enhance the spiritual quality of our meetings.

When the development of the intellectual nature proceeds faster than that of the spiritual, such a situation renders communication with the Thought Adjuster both difficult and dangerous. Likewise, overspiritual development tends to produce a fanatical and perverted interpretation of the spirit leadings of the divine indweller. **110:6.4**

Balance is the key.

<u>Creating Community and Relationships</u>

Besides addressing prayer and worship, as well as seeking improved study, study group leaders must consider steps to cultivating community and relationships.

Personality cannot very well perform in isolation. Man is innately a social creature; he is dominated by the craving of belongingness. It is literally true, "No man lives unto himself." 112:1.16

The Creators well know that it is "not good for man to be alone," and provision is accordingly made for companionship, even on Paradise. 25:8.4

If no one had mentioned anything about study groups, we would have invented them, not only for the sake of group prayer and enhanced study but for the sake of relationship and community.

There is a real purpose in the socialization of religion. It is the purpose of group religious activities to dramatize the loyalties of religion; to magnify the lures of truth, beauty, and goodness; to foster the attractions of supreme values; to enhance the service of unselfish fellowship; to glorify the potentials of family life; to promote religious education; to provide wise counsel and spiritual guidance; and to encourage group worship. And all live religions encourage human friendship, conserve morality, promote neighborhood welfare, and facilitate the spread of the essential gospel of their respective messages of eternal salvation. 99:6.2

The group potential is always far in excess of the simple sum of the attributes of the component individuals. 10:5.2

I am reminded again of our history of avoiding a church-like institution. The reasons may be obvious, that we don't want the rigidity and authority that a church might bring and that we want nothing that an institution might erect to stand between us and the revelatory truths of *The Urantia Book*.

But in avoiding churchiness, we have created a need to make up for what churches can provide. Churches have done well in creating a sense of community, of friendship and acceptance, of a place where people can worship together. Perhaps most of all they provide stability. If I don't go to that beautiful, stain-glassed building on the corner this Sunday, I still know that other people will and that it will be there with services next Sunday as well as the Sunday after that. We cannot necessarily say that about our study groups. Perhaps someday we will evolve into that kind of institutional momentum borne of brick, mortar, and stability, or perhaps we can partially fill this need for social support in our online meetings.

Meanwhile, study group leaders have to try a lot harder than they might have had to with a different structure, not only to expand the Revelation one group at a time but also to keep their own study groups vibrant and extant, to keep the light burning.

A close friend of mine, a stalwart and active reader, recently said to me, "You know, the Urantia movement just isn't very attractive." This person's statement had nothing to do with any of the specific organizations.

That statement shocked me somewhat, and I'm not sure that I agree with it.

Whatever its truth, however, this individual's perception can be a call for us to make the movement more attractive, whether we are describing study groups, seminars, local conferences, or international events.

Study group leaders need to be assertive, to reach out to potential readers, especially those who already have the book and have made contact, and to seek to bring them to the group. Our groups need to be welcoming, to be appealing, to be safe for someone new. They need to be places that showcase the truths and beauties of our unique Revelation, to be places of prayer and worship, but also to be places of friendship and community. Our meetings need to be where we can go to share and to break bread together.

Leaders must to reach out to readers they've heard of and to those they've not seen of late. The organizations need to help people find each other.

Conclusion

Despite the advantage we have of offering the Fifth Epochal Revelation of Truth to the world, our efforts are not producing the numbers we want in terms of the growth of active participants. We need to reach out to non-readers who have the potential to become readers, help current readers to become more involved, thorough, and in-depth students of the book, and encourage active readers to become contributors to outreach. We need to rededicate ourselves to a wise and spiritual mission of outreach and growth.

There are three separate evidences of [the Thought Adjuster's] indwelling of the human mind:

1. Humanitarian fellowship — love.

2. Interpretation of the universe — wisdom.

3. Spiritual evaluation of life — worship. **196:3.6-9**

Study groups are very, very important places and study group hosts are very, very important leaders in our pursuit of stronger community, progressing comprehension, and fuller and more real prayer and worship.