



EMBODIED SOCIAL JUSTICE

by

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LIVING AGREEMENTS

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Who We Are

We are aware that we, like all people, have blind spots, and we want to share who we are and the social location we exist within. We are a group of four people, three of whom participated in the Embodied Social Justice course, and all four who participated in a 6-month research project sponsored by the [Pocket Project](#)* on the topic of Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Restoration in the U.S. One of us is Black-bodied, and three of us are white-bodied. Two of us identify as female, and two of us identify as male, and all four of us identify as cisgender. Related to sexuality, one of us identifies as bisexual / queer, one of us as hetero fluid, and two of us as heterosexual. All four of us identify as able-bodied. Related to classism, two of us identify as middle class, one of us is engaging in healing personally and ancestrally around scarcity / poverty, and another identifies as middle class and makes life choices differently than some people who consider themselves middle class, for example: not choosing home ownership. We want to acknowledge that writing this paragraph together took us into new territory in our collaboration and brought us closer.

We each bring our individual experiences -- such as writer, massage therapist, choreographer, somatic psychotherapist, nonviolent communication trainer, ordained minister, spiritual teacher, architectural engineering and design, activist, embodiment coach, group facilitator, and we all enjoy dance, art, and nature. We share a background in the community of [Thomas Hübl](#).*

*Links in Appendix



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Introduction

For our Embodied Social Justice Certificate project, we have chosen to focus on the Agreements (how we practice being together) which were provided to us in the course, sourced from the East Bay Meditation Center. Our idea is to extrapolate on each agreement with the intention of supporting people, particularly white-bodied people, who are gathering to take some sort of social action or address a social issue, to *be the change* vs. unconsciously re-enacting domination structures. Inspired by the ESJ course, we are laying out the agreements, competencies which support learning and integrating, common pitfalls, experiential practices, playfulness, and a bit of our personal experiences. We want to encourage others (and ourselves!) to sustain engaging questions like:

- How do we hold a particular social justice issue?
- How can we recognize our preconceived ideas and assumptions kindly, and make new choices?
- How can we explore and open to new learning again and again ... personally and together?
- Who is this particularly benefitting and what are the living agreements that best will keep them centered, inspired for embodying the work in their higher potential?
- How can we create this document in the spirit of a living document?
- What living agreements will support people to engage in the work we are gathered to do?
- How can we include our whole selves -- our bodies, hearts, minds, spirits, and the motivation that calls us to this change -- within the process?
- What is our sense of our group container as we engage in these agreements and related practices? Are there other agreements we want or need to bring in to support the intention of our group?

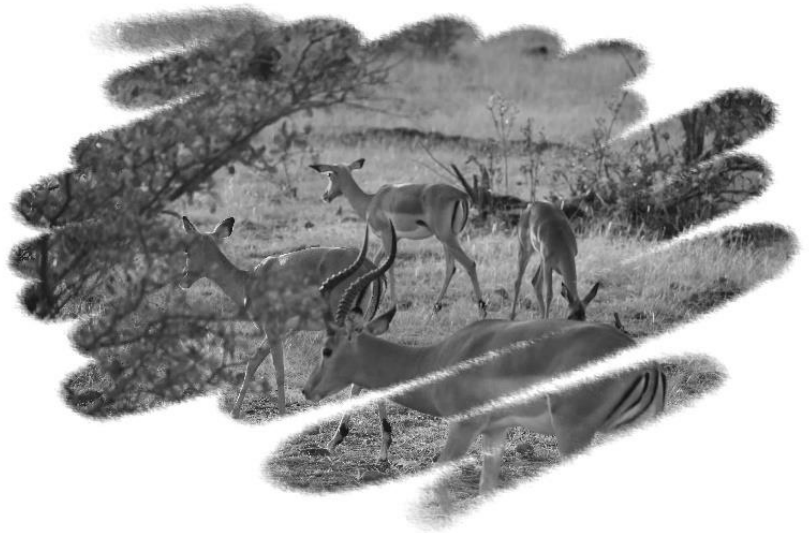


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1-Try It On:

Be willing to “try on” new ideas, or ways of doing things that might not be what you prefer or are familiar with.

Trying it on requires flexibility and a willingness to experiment. Trying on new ideas creates freshness, like the heart of a child, engaging in play and genuine curiosity. It’s also the only way we can learn something new. What supports the ability to try it on includes: Trusting the process, trusting the group, trusting self to be able to be with difficulty. And trust, which has a correlation with a relaxed nervous system, tends to emerge naturally when we engage in shared agreements about how to be with each other.



What can get in the way: perfectionism, fear of failure, habits, already knowing, contracting, distancing, othering, shame, ‘needing’ to be different or better than I am.

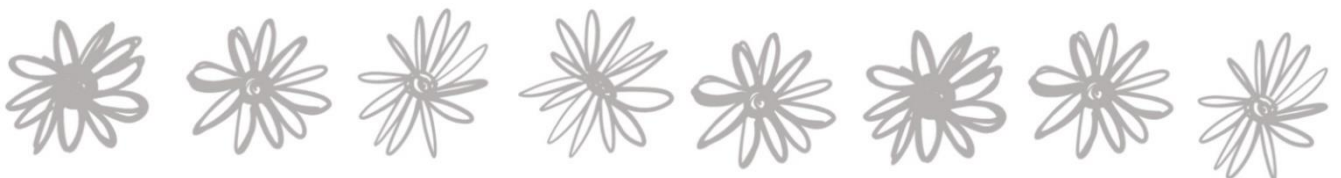
“Not all people can activate or trigger me, but there are some individuals and groups I become fearful of and I can feel myself contracting. As a result of becoming small, I find myself distancing to feel safe again. In this state, even as a spiritual practitioner doing social justice work, I find it hard to remember my original intention, let alone trying on someone else’s new ideas, perspectives or even their presence.”

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Take a moment to breathe and feel your body.
As you feel ready, use this page for contemplation and journaling.

When this agreement becomes integrated... Curiosity! Collaboration, innocence, inner freedom, and allowing what is possible to emerge in me and within our group. We love to play!



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2-Practice Self Focus:

Attend to and speak about your own experiences and responses. Do not speak for a whole group or express assumptions about the experience of others.

Practicing Self Focus involves using “I” language and sharing from our personal experience and perspective which includes vulnerability and transparency. Self focus allows me to learn about what I am confronting.

What can get in the way: assumptions, generalizing, deferring responsibility, fear of vulnerability, unclarity and unfamiliarity about how to speak this way, awareness drawn away from your center, getting lost in what’s going on over there in the other or what’s happening in the culture, feeling “at the effect” of others.

“I find practicing self focus automatically shifts me into speaking from my experience vs. making a declaration I may be tempted to make about something being universally true.

This deepens my self-connection, increases both my felt sense of vulnerability and strength at the same time, and helps me become more available to what other people have to say.”

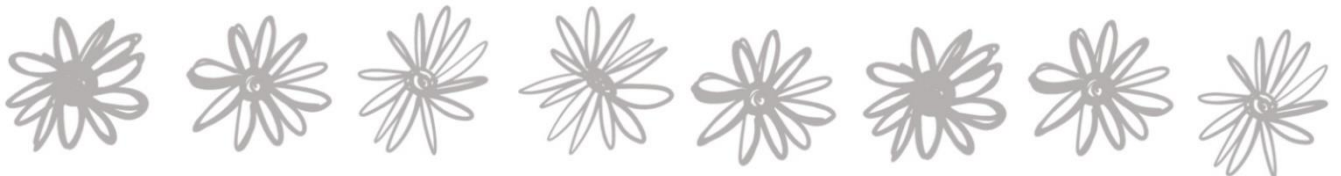


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When this agreement is integrated . . . Returning to Self focus with kindness and compassion allows grounding and clarity to emerge which expands clear connection, and potentially opens a group field referred to as “we” space. Strong individuals make strong groups, strong groups create strong social movements.



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3-Understand the Difference Between Intent & Impact:

Try to understand and acknowledge impact. Denying the impact of something said by focusing on intent is often more destructive than the initial interaction.

Understanding the difference between intent and impact allows us to connect authentically and learn about each other's lived experience and how we are interconnected. Intention matters, as well as the actual result of our (and others) actions. We grow and learn when we can receive feedback and discover what can be reflected upon through our experience.



What can get in the way: defensiveness, fixed perception, arrogance / a power over stance / believing we know more about someone else's lived experience than they do, needing to be right, shame about hurting someone, the good/bad binary.

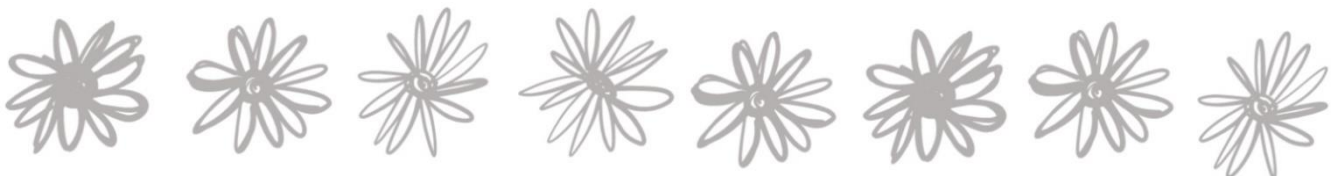
"I was leading a consultation group and gave one of the participants some feedback that she took completely differently than how I intended it. At first, I thought my expression of intent should be enough, but clearly it was not. She did not feel I was taking in her hurt and couldn't feel heard until I let go of what my intention was and simply listened to how it had landed for her. I believe shame was going both directions in this interaction. She felt I was shaming her, which was not at all my intent. And then my hurt at being so misunderstood was followed by shame at hurting her, both of which made me defensive and unable to take in her pain. It was a hot mess! Ultimately I learned a lot from it, but the relationship never recovered."

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When this agreement is integrated. . . We learn to regularly hold a space of complexity that can include contradicting or seemingly contradictory experiences, our connection can deepen, and we touch our shared humanity. The more this occurs, new possibilities emerge for us to connect and collaborate.



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4-Practice “Both / And”:

When speaking, substitute “and” for “but”. This practice acknowledges and honors multiple realities.

Practicing “both/and” allows us to connect with others and even within ourselves to include multiple perspectives, so that we can open to our wholeness and to each other. Both/and practice is a practice of abundance and the diversity which is inherent in nature.

What can get in the way: unfelt feelings, fear, habitual thinking, patriarchal cultural norms, a world of power over and power under, haves and have nots, and winners and losers. Re-“butt”-ing is a way within the trauma field to attempt to assert value.



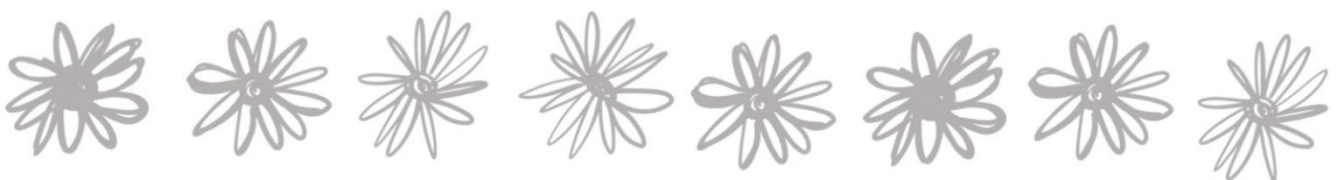
“Sometimes in groups, I will hear someone say something that seems a direct contradiction of my experience or understanding, and I feel the impulse to contradict them. When I can hold this agreement in mind and have the presence to share my specific experience as another example, with “and” vs. “but,” I often feel more clarity after I speak about how both perspectives may be true and helpful in different situations. Even when that doesn’t happen, I find speaking with “and” opens up space and compassion within me for multiple perspectives, which allows a wider ground of relaxation to simply be.”

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When this agreement becomes integrated... It disrupts oppressive outer and inner structures and makes space for a new paradigm of collaboration and 'power with.' We can learn to be present with the discomfort or even helplessness of not knowing what to do, and we can grow the capacity and spaciousness to include more voices and perspectives.



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5-Refrain from Blaming or Shaming Self & Others: Practice Giving Skillful Feedback.

Giving skillful feedback allows us to connect, collaborate, and learn together in a paradigm of shared power.



What can get in the way: fear, overwhelm, confusion, insecurity, power over/under paradigm, developmental and attachment trauma, habit.

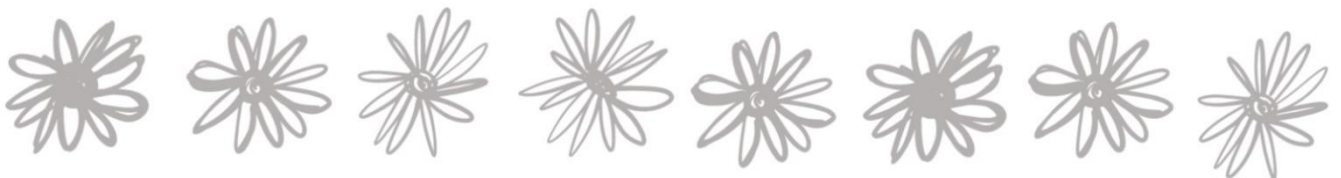
"I had a chance to practice this several times in a group I was in. A few times a facilitator said things that appalled me, and I had the sense they had a blind spot about their white privilege. I felt anger and heat through my body, and simultaneously I froze. I couldn't believe what I had heard. I was not able to get clear about the feedback I wanted to give in the moment. After spending some time with what I witnessed, I was able to get clear on my perspective of what was said and my reaction, and speak in a sincere, compassionate way that was coming from understanding and a desire to connect, convey impact, share my perspective about what I would have liked to happen instead. The feedback seemed well-received, and the facilitator's behavior changed in subsequent gatherings. "

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When this agreement becomes integrated... it gradually liberates us for deeper facing and accepting what is, which opens the space for aligned actions. A lot of energy tends to get tied up in blaming and shaming and changing these habits touches a deep inner level. It usually only happens successfully within a community, so the discomforts are held together, and the new behaviors which feel so vulnerable at first are held and supported. We need community so we don't go down the drainpipe of individuality into a shame spiral. We can hold it together. It belongs to all of us. Anyone can make the same mistakes.



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6-Move Up / Move Back:

Encourage full participation by all present. Take note of who is speaking and who is not. If you tend to speak often, consider “moving back” and vice versa.



Moving up and moving back is based on awareness of privilege and disrupts how we are culturally indoctrinated to orient around systems of oppression. Practicing moving up and moving back allows the exploratory process to happen.

What can get in the way: lack of awareness of how privilege is manifesting generally and specifically in various situations, lack of presence in a given moment, shyness, impulsivity, and internalized racial inferiority or superiority. Also, there are individual differences - Some people feel more comfortable speaking than others. Positionality, the power imbalance that can happen between teacher/student, can also be a factor.

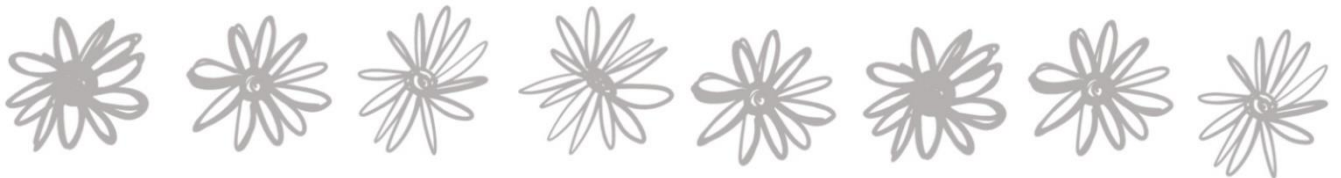
“I had a chance to practice this in an ESJ group in a way that felt good to me. I am grateful I learned this agreement as it was not in my awareness before this ESJ training. I (a white-bodied person) landed in a mixed group with BIPOC and white participants. After a few previous experiences in small groups where everyone did not have time to speak, I was intending to practice ‘moving back’ and speak last in case we ran out of time. A BIPOC person stepped forward to facilitate us and called on people to share for the agreed upon time. The person called on me before they spoke, and I said I would prefer to go last. When they asked me again to speak before them, I agreed, and spoke for a shorter time than we agreed (1-2min). I was glad I did, as this left time for this person to take the full time that the others had, before the small group ended and we returned to the big zoom room. “

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When this agreement becomes integrated... Over time, the group may find a new spacious experience, moving with the energy of emergence that no longer carries the domination imprint, but is truly life serving and collaborative.

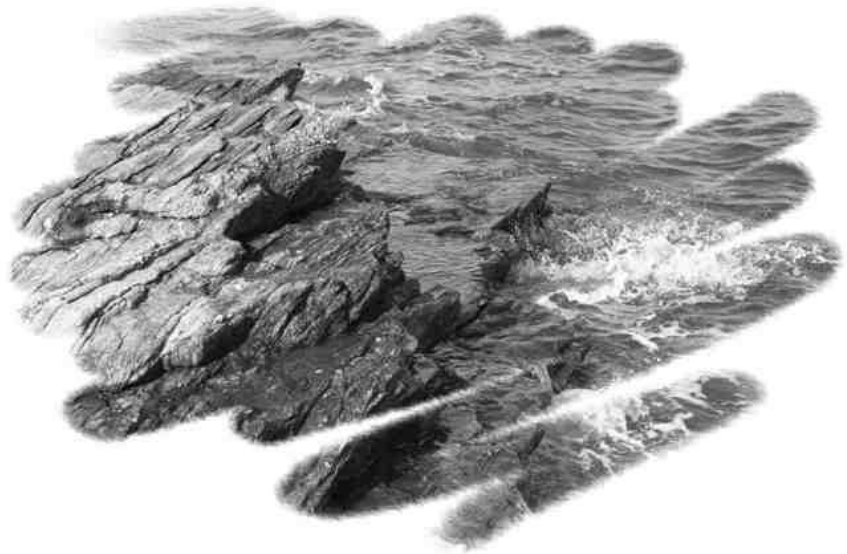


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7-Practice Mindful Listening:

Try to avoid planning what you'll say as you listen to others. Be willing to be surprised, to learn something new. Listen with your whole self.

Mindful listening is a practice of opening to receive what someone is sharing through their words and their whole way of being. The practice opens space to learn and connect, and from that connection to discover what's next.



What can get in the way: Thinking about what I'm going to say, anxiety about getting it right, thinking I already know what the other person is going to say, dissociation / spacing out, boredom.

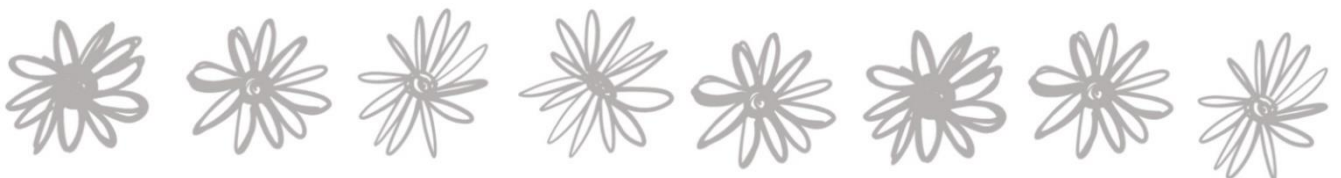
"Mindful listening is a key component of an essential spiritual practice I engage in, of being in relation with other people, through whole body listening with my partners, taking in what they transmit. Beyond being willing to be surprised by what others express, when it is my turn to speak, I often begin from an empty place, and in my speaking, I surprise myself, and learn."

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When this agreement becomes integrated... Awareness through the body-mind system becomes grounded in the present, opening to inspiration and innovation. A deepening of this practice transcends subject and object, bringing intersubjectivity -- it's neither my thinking nor your thinking, but our or even life's creativity flowing through us together.



LIVING AGREEMENTS

8-Confidentiality:

Take home learnings, but don't identify anyone other than yourself, now or later. If you want to follow up with anyone regarding something they said during a session, ask first and respect their wishes.

Confidentiality relates to not extracting / using other people's experiences or pain as a way to avoid speaking vulnerably for myself, with "I." This practice prevents gossip, even unintentional gossip, and supports trust, containment, respect, and safety within the group.

What can get in the way? Lack of awareness, fear of being vulnerable, an absence of skills to connect without talking about other people's experiences.



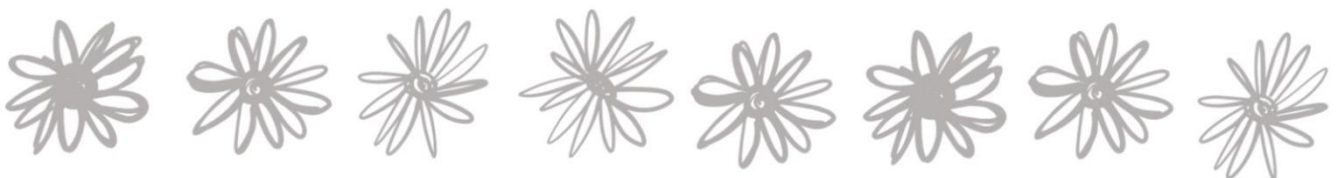
"I find this agreement calls forth personal clarity for me. When I want to share a point of personal learning or contemplation with a friend or colleague, I like to pause and check in -- specifically what do I want to share and why? Is it mine to share? What's motivating me? What about simply sharing a contemplation I am engaged in without referencing the meeting or where it came from? This one has become easier for me over time, and I really appreciate the way the practice continues to help me grow."

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When this agreement becomes integrated... The group benefits in that the container seems to feel stronger to people, and personal development of group members is supported as each person becomes clearer about 'mine' and 'yours'. Dignity and respect and sovereignty emerge through this way of being together.



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9-Right to Pass:

You can say “I pass” if you don’t wish to speak.

Right to pass allows for agency, autonomy, and respecting our and others’ rights to choose their level of participation, which is part of the framework for acceptance and inclusion. It also takes into consideration that some people may be on the shy side or need more time to ‘warm up’ and speak into the

group. Other

shared

understandings

support the right to pass - a groundwork of safety to make

mistakes, not to know, to be messy,

and to learn in public.



What gets in the way of the right to pass? Pressure or expectation for everyone to speak / take a turn might be an obstacle. It is important to be aware of the value of presence without words. Not speaking does not equate with not contributing.

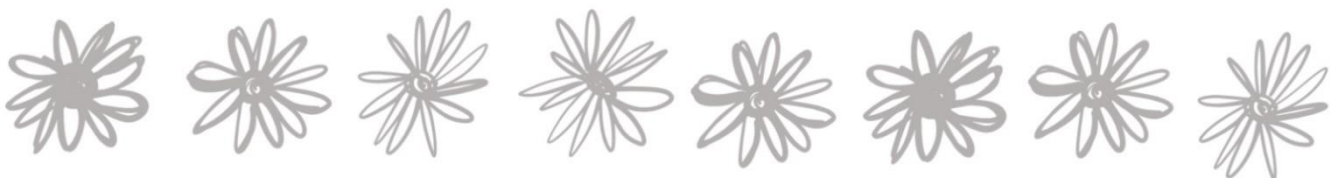
“I find all these agreements relevant in my co-facilitation role with 8th graders. But perhaps, especially this one, which honors the teenagers’ sovereignty.”

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When this agreement becomes integrated... We create a respectful space which allows a sense of safety to emerge within the group, opening the space for people to choose to speak / or not speak into a space of mutual discovery and love.



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Appendix

The ESJ Program Agreements (how we practice being together), Source: East Bay Meditation Center

1. Try It On: Be willing to “try on” new ideas, or ways of doing things that might not be what you prefer or are familiar with.
2. Practice Self Focus: Attend to and speak about your own experiences and responses. Do not speak for a whole group or express assumptions about the experience of others.
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9. Right to Pass: You can say “I pass” if you don’t wish to speak.

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Links from “Who We Are” Section

Pocket Project: <https://pocketproject.org/>

Thomas Hübl: <https://thomashuebl.com/about/>

Introduction to Living Agreements Video: <https://youtu.be/OxiDiYuIWOA>

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