

The Circle Process (as practiced by Coming to the Table)

What Do We Mean by "Circle"?

What we understand as the "Circle process" has been a part of the community life of Indigenous peoples around the world for millennia. And different Indigenous peoples have their own ways of conducting Circle-type processes.

Non-Natives who now use talking Circles have, directly or indirectly, learned Circle values and practices from Indigenous people. The process is endlessly adaptable to different situations and cultures. Non-Native Circle practitioners use elements that are culturally appropriate and comfortable for those in their group. This happens organically.

So, while we are attempting to give a description of the Circle process here as many of those we know practice it, we do not view ourselves as an "authority" on the subject. Rather, because the term "Circle" has gained wide usage, we simply want to indicate for newcomers what is generally meant.

As we understand the Circle process from many of the Circle people we know, "Circle" refers to a process of facilitating dialogue wherein:

- 1) A talking piece is the primary mode of regulating the conversation, so that each person has an equal opportunity to speak.
- 2) Participants engage in an intentional conversation about values and a set of guidelines for how they want to be together.
- 3) The process opens and closes with some form of ceremony.
- 4) Building relationships precedes and is treated as equally important as tackling difficult issues.

Not all people who describe their work as Circles engage all aspects of the process. Sometimes that is fine; other times the experience is less than what it could be. For example, a friend told us that she wasn't too keen on Circles. She had attended one where participants "ganged up" on the person they deemed to be "the problem" and then told the person what to do. Needless to say, this is not our understanding of how Circles work.

Also, some YouTube clips show people sitting in a circle but not using a talking piece. They also show participants going right into talking about the conflict without first exploring shared values, agreeing on guidelines, or spending time building relationships and an understanding of each other. Again, Circles engage these processes in order to create a safe space for all the participants and to build good relations that endure beyond addressing the immediate conflict or harm.

The Circle: A Safe Space to Come Together

In Indigenous societies, coming together in a circle has been as natural as sitting around a fire and reflecting on shared concerns. It inspires a different quality of conversation. People tell stories and share experiences. We are more likely to speak from our hearts and listen from our hearts as well. We want to experience each other not as adversaries but as fellow human beings. We find a place where we can share what is going on with us, whatever that may be.

The Circle process brings these qualities into modern experience. Circles offer a different way of dealing with the challenges of everyday life as well as of responding to the larger challenges we face. Circles help us learn how to “be in a good way” with each other, and they give us a place and time to practice this positive way of being.

- Circles draw on our best values;
- Circles help participants respond from one’s best self;
- Circles build community;
- Circles create a space for deep listening and being heard;
- Circles generate mutual understanding and respect;
- Circles honor all voices equally;
- Circles make decisions by consensus;
- Circles cultivate mutual support;
- Circles honor the gifts, knowledge, talents, and experiences that each participant brings.

Though participants may not realize it at first, Circles offer a structured form of dialogue. The idea is that we can engage in difficult conversations most fruitfully when we first nurture our shared values. Setting aside time up front to build relationships based on what we have in common, Circles create a safe space for participants to express different viewpoints and strong emotions as they discuss difficult issues later on. The process is useful for both communicating and making decisions.

Participating in Circles is inherently transformative, because we experience the world from more perspectives than our own. Drawing on diverse knowledge and experiences, Circles generate options and solutions that are often outside the box of conventional thinking and that often go beyond what one person could generate on their own.

NOTES:

- This summary is copied from The Living Justice Press website ([click here](#))
- An excellent guide to “Healing Circles” is available online in a blog sponsored by the Community Justice for Youth Institute (CJYI) in Chicago ([click here](#))
- A great resource for more detailed information is *The Little Book of Circle Process* by Kay Pranis ([click here](#))