

The Growing Circle of Circles

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The circle of circles - touching one another, learning from one another, drawing sustenance from one another - sharing our stories from circle to circle. The circles of the Yukon nurtured us, fed our spirits, calmed our anxieties. Now we support each other in Minnesota and sometimes the ripples reach out beyond our borders.

A recent circle in Austin, Texas, their first circle, used the spiral from South St. Paul as their talking piece. Ellen Halbert, the keeper, explained the history and meaning of that talking piece for South St. Paul which gave the talking piece meaning for them. It was so significant for them that Ellen asked me if I could get her more spirals. She has plans for lots more circles.

The Austin circle involved a serious drug addict who had lived on the street for many years and stole to support his drug habit. He was assaultive toward the jail staff and entered into the process looking for an easier way out. Still, the circle reached out and touched him in places he didn't expect and he found himself believing he could change.

The offender sent Ellen a Christmas card with a note saying, "Deep down inside I felt like you really cared about me. And that felt great. You don't get to experience that type of feeling when you're a drug addict. I never felt close to people like y'all in the circle."

Circles in Minnesota began as a part of the criminal justice process, but they soon broke out of the confines of the criminal justice system. Shane Price, trained as part of a juvenile justice project, developed the circle process for use in cases of child abuse and neglect in the Hawthorne neighborhood of North Minneapolis. Jessica Hughes, a volunteer in Shane's project, began using circles in her position at the Office of Equal Opportunity at the University of Minnesota.

Terry Anfinson, a member of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Community Circle, introduced the idea of circles to the Rum River Special Ed Cooperative where they are being developed for special education students by Char Bentaas. Mary Leadum Ticiu, South St. Paul Community Justice Council, began using circles to resolve conflict or behavior problems in an elementary school. South St. Paul Schools now have three staff who use circle process in working with students.

Gwen Chandler-Rhivers, trained as a part of the Summit University circle group for criminal cases, is using circles in her job with a transition housing program for women. A member of the South St. Paul Community Justice Council used the circle process for a very difficult situation in her church.

In a great offering to the state as a whole, keepers from many circles came together to keep circles for a state conference on policy concerning serious juvenile offenders. Those discussion circles were linked in spirit to one another and to the community circles, in a common yearning for a good way to respond to troubled juveniles.

And so it goes. . . ever expanding and circling back - like the spiral - sometimes going deep within, sometimes stretching way out to encompass something new outside oneself. The growth of the use of circles in Minnesota has had a wonderful spontaneous quality.

The circle process is moving, inspiring, and uplifting, but it is also very difficult. No circle

project is finding the path easy. An abundance of spirit is necessary, but not sufficient to create sustainable community processes which alter our way of making decisions, working out conflicts and living in relationship to one another. Individual circles are often spiritually transformative, but the day to day business of making circles possible is often gritty and muddy. Messy details have to be worked out and then reworked when it doesn't function as expected. There is no roadmap to follow and, if trust is a problem, any misstep may be interpreted as deliberate undermining of others.

Circles are raising very difficult questions of meaning and personal commitment in the context of community life: What do we mean by spirituality in a public process? How do we honor one another's spiritual expression? What symbols are meaningful in a diverse culture? How do we invest meaning in symbols and keep that meaning fresh and vibrant? What is the responsibility of the individual to the larger whole? What are our fundamental assumptions about human nature? What does speaking from the heart require of us? Can we keep our hearts open when something hurts us? Can we truly live these values?

Common struggles are apparent in various circle groups. It is very challenging to shift from giving advice and providing answers to sharing personal stories and raising genuine questions (ones to which you do not already have the answer.) Most circles struggle to find that tone which is truly cognizant of our interchangeability with one another, the tone of complete acceptance of the worth of another.

Most circles are also very dependent upon the core circle group to provide support for the person being helped. Circles will not be sustainable over time if they do not draw in more supporters from the natural environment of the person in circle, including extended family, neighbors, friends.

Most circles are also struggling with the relationship between the lay members and the system professionals who sit in circle. The new roles for professionals are not clear. We say, "leave your title at the door," but it is not that simple in practice. Professionals have information which is useful to the circle and they have responsibilities which do not stop because they are in circle. Power needs to be left outside the door, but professional responsibilities which feel in conflict with the circle need to be articulated and worked through with the whole circle. Confusion and misunderstanding about the role of the professional in the circle process can arise even when the professional is deeply committed to circle.

Even when circles do not reach the full flow of human heart and spirit, they are usually powerful. All of the circles are demonstrating the existence of a huge untapped reservoir of good will and caring by community members for others whom they did not previously know. They are also demonstrating the incredible human capacity to break out of long-standing destructive behaviors. Circles show us over and over again the power of love.

We have only begun to scratch the surface in the ways in which the circle process can change the content and meaning of our lives. We are limited only by our own imaginations, our willingness to be in respectful and loving relationship with every part of creation and our ability to allow the pattern of the circle to emerge without trying to manage or control it.

Circle is a way to bring people together so that their natural capacity to hear one another, understand one another and take care of one another is freed and given wings. Happy flying!!