



Janel Beeman, who has attended a number of PeerSpirit workshops, shares with us the first meeting of an on-going group. She begins by introducing members of the circle so we can see that the women are stepping way beyond their cultural norms simply to attend a circle meeting of women. The circle was, of course, conducted in Spanish. In subsequent meetings the group has been sharing activities relevant to their family responsibilities. For example, one week they practiced cooking with tofu to help with lowering cholesterol and family budgets. The women all chose their own aliases for sharing their lives in this story.

Circle Tale #30, April 2002

A Circle Tale from Todos Santos, a small fishing and tourist community in Baja California Sur

The six of us range in age from 33 to 83. The youngest, Lupita, came to me with sweet tears last year after an Intercambio meeting which was a weekly exchange between Gringos and Latinos focusing on language. Her tears were for the validation of her life in the oversize book with full-page photos, "Women in the Material World" (by Faith D'Aluisio and Peter Menzel, Sierra Club, 1996) that was used for the lesson plan that day. She said her daily chores include doing laundry by hand for a family of four including an incontinent, autistic child. She felt her existence validated by the book of women who look like her.

A group, even small, had been too threatening to my neighbor Luz Maria. "Yes, we talk to family, although there are certain things that can't be said. I'm afraid to talk with other women." She confided that as 10 and 12-year-olds she and her sister had been beaten with dead baby pigs as punishment for having let them die by oversight in a hail storm while the rest of the family spent days gathering fruit in the mountains.

Dolores birthed 11 children; three died young, two from measles. There weren't any vaccines or medical providers around 75 years ago. Her knees ache. She can hardly walk from rheumatism. Her husband, Narciso, smaller in stature than she, will only let her come because he knows I can get work for him. At home, she is still afraid for her physical safety.

The "lady" of us all, Oceania, has such dignity and class. She is an amazing hard worker who has never let me down in our five year working relationship running a B & B. She, too, comes out of the hills where water is scarce and tortillas are few. Articulate and witty, with a moment's notice she could walk into any gathering, anywhere in the world and be recognized as the beauty she is. She has a third grade education although both she and her sister really wanted more. Their father deemed it unnecessary. The brothers turned the opportunity down. Noticing her very red hands the first morning of our working relationship I inquired, "What have you been doing with your hands?"

"I've done the laundry for the family before coming to work," Oceania responded.

"No washing machine?" I asked, surprised, because her husband is a plumber and an electrician.

"Yes, but Juan doesn't want me to use it before he builds a protective shed."

"How long have you had the washer?"

"Oh, a little over a year."

"No!" I exclaimed. "You mean he wants to use up your hands and not the machine? Take it to the Laundromat then."

She responds, "No, Juan doesn't want me to take it to the Laundromat. He doesn't think they are clean enough because everyone's dirt gets left there."

The washer was hooked up the next day. It's a good thing Juan was my friend first.

The thing I know about our final member, Andrea, is that at age 15 her boyfriend from the rancho of her birth kidnapped her. At the time that was not an uncommon tradition. In fact, the boyfriend had talked with her father, so what else could be needed? She fought like a wild cat, but to no avail.



I knew there were tender issues of a Gringo being directive in a situation like this. We so often think we know best. How could I broach circle guidelines and agreements? I was very cautious in forming the group not to be too dominant. I watched Oceania last year form the Intercambio meeting. We learned English and Spanish, dances and play. We laughed until our sides almost split.

When I called the first meeting I put flowers on the side table. Blacks and whites and grays of hand woven rugs graced the flagstone floor. Pillows with accents of bright reds and greens were scattered around. Space was left open in the center for meaningful objects, although the shape of the circle wasn't perfect.

Stillness reigned for a few moments. I remembered that these are women who have seldom shared their stories; have never sat in circle; have seldom been listened to; and have seldom trusted other women. I remembered that all of these women have taken steps of great courage to step over a cultural divide simply to be here. I have done few preparations regarding guidelines for fear some, like Luz Maria, would bolt. Andrea, holding a round stone talking-piece speaks first. She asks for confidentiality. Stating that the only way we can feel safe here in "Nuestra Reunion" is if we maintain perfect confidentiality and not even talk with each other about what was said in meeting when we may meet on the street. And, she continues "we need to refrain from judging each other but instead listen with compassion not taking sides" in a community of 5000 locals where everyone is related.

Oceania takes hold of the stone "And we need not to interrupt each other but listen attentively to what each of us says. This is very important, each of us speaks in order to reflect on what's been said."

"If anyone needs support before, during, after or in between meetings, we can ask for it" chimes in Lupita without the stone in her hand, but in a group so small and attentive the energy flows. "We could be a real and continuing help to each other in our lives."

Profound gratitude and respect grace the depths of my heart. After this opening discussion, Dolores, hesitant at first to tell anything of her life, begins recounting it with gusto, laughter and tears. Perhaps, this is the first time in 83 years her experience is fully received. The women tell stories of horror and humor, of passion and penury, of suffering and survival. Stories of love wrought out of mean circumstances. Stories like I've never heard before. They plumb the depths of courage and acceptance of the way their lives have been and are. I wonder how I will frame my life of rebellious, unconscious entitlement, taking everything that life would give me and damning it for what it didn't. I am gratefully humbled again.

If you have a tale to tell, contact the PeerSpirit office and we'll help you share it.

*For more information on many applications of circle, visit our web site at www.peerspirit.com and subscribe to our monthly Circle Tale newsletter using the subscription mechanism at the top right of the page. Your e-mail address will **not** be shared or used by anyone other than PeerSpirit, and you can unsubscribe yourself at any time.*