



This month's circle tale is from Sandra Abrahamson and Mary Jordon, who participated in the Canadian Circle Practicum on Gabriola Island, BC, last November. Thank you for your courage and work.

Circle Tale #48, February 2004 Canadian Circle Practicum

We left our Circle Practicum experience with Peerspirit energized and stimulated with ideas of how we could use the Circle Council methodology in our work with communities and organizations. We have now facilitated two successful circle councils...both quite different and very exciting.

The first was a day with the staff of a small addiction recovery facility. They have been through some major changes in the past few months...leadership, staffing, structure and systems changes that had left many of them feeling fearful and fragmented. They were a group of 17, from counselors and support staff to cooks and maintenance. While the circle was introduced as team building we were clear that we were sharing a process with them that we hoped would be helpful with their teamwork.

It began awkwardly, partly due to some venue chaos that we unfortunately hadn't foreseen. We were surprised at how quickly people began sharing their stories and attribute that to the circle magic. Yes! There is something about people facing each other in a circle that profoundly affects the environment. By the end of the day people were saying things like; "I feel good about my job again", "This was so much better than I expected", "I'm willing to let the past go", "I feel more like a team than I ever have in the years I've worked here".

We spoke with the Executive Director about 10 days after the circle. She said people were still excited about it and are being mindful of the practices in their working relationships. A couple of the counselors had immediately begun adapting the process to use with clients. They are having a staff meeting this week and are planning on using the process.

Our second foray into creating circle was quite challenging. We were asked to facilitate a planning retreat for a Board, staff and stakeholders representing a large rural region that recently experienced a large natural disaster. This Board was given the responsibility for a very large pot of government money to steward education, training and employment development in the region. As you might expect there are very diverse opinions in the region about how the dollars should be allotted. This is particularly true of communities that perceive themselves to be in immediate crisis and feel they have no control over the money.

The goal of the retreat was to gather information and ideas from stakeholders in the region in order for the Board to set its direction. We saw some potential for circle work and suggested it to the manager who was sponsoring us. We described the possibilities and she agreed, although later admitted that she was skeptical about the "touchy/feely, hippy bullshit". She agreed because she knew us and trusted us. Yikes! Nothing like throwing your credibility on the line. In retrospect, we decided we had been pretty gutsy to test our circle council expertise with a diverse group in a crisis. We combined two models, the circle council and a modified future search. There were about 25 participants. We began by creating the center using objects that we chose to represent the past, present and future of the region. People had been invited to contribute objects and while some passed, some had put thought into the process and others dug into their pockets and brief cases coming up with some innovative objects. One man found a dead battery in his briefcase and when he added it he talked about energy and re-energizing. People began to relax into the process and enjoy the sharing generated by the objects.

The combination of the models worked very well. Most of the 'work' was done with the future search model, moving them back into circle and using the talking piece to pull the experience together. It was in that process that the concerns and resentments began to surface. The talking piece council offered a



context where folks knew they would be heard without interruption, justification or cross talk. Although the concerns were not worked with directly in the large group council, they were on the table either directly or indirectly in the small group discussions.

While we were conscious that the depth reached in the large circle process was not as deep as we had anticipated, (many people held on to their roles and agendas) there was still a sense of community and connection that we believe grew out of the circle council model. The strongest common ground identified was their need and willingness to collaborate together for the whole region.

The talking piece council and the silent council were powerful experiences for them. At the end of the second day and the exit of the stakeholders we heard many comments: "we got a lot done," "weren't sure in the beginning how it would all come together, but it did." Those communities who arrived feeling somewhat marginalized left confident of their inclusion.

In the half-day spent with the Board we shifted the process more to the circle council. At one point we initiated separate discussions with the Board and staff. The Board immediately looked for the talking stick to begin. This smaller group, processing the experience of the retreat and planning their next steps definitely experienced a deeper level of council. There was talk about using the process in their Board meetings and introducing it as they restructure and expand the Board.

We are affirmed with these experiences of facilitating the circle council process. We are seeing the potential for circles everywhere and have to remind ourselves that perhaps we have found a hammer everything is now looking like a nail!

People we talk to are intrigued, many wanting more information. We are both truly energized with the experience and the possibilities this model affords institutions, and communities that are desperately needing to slow down, focus clearly and lead with their hearts.

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.*