



Pamela Austin Thompson, CEO of the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE), writes this month's Circle Tale. Pam was introduced to PeerSpirit Circle through her participation in The Center for Nursing Leadership, and took the Circle Practicum in Tucson in February 2000. This past year, Pam and Christina co-authored the NEWEST PeerSpirit booklet: ***PeerSpirit Circling for Nursing Leadership, A Model for Conversation and Shared Leadership in the Work Place***. For further information and ordering, visit our bookstore page. The booklet reflects our ongoing belief that health care is a leading indicator of how systems will change. Thank you, Pam.

Circle Tale, February 2006 A Nurse's Circle

As part of our strategic initiatives, AONE sponsors seminars that encourage nurse leadership development. In November, supported by the recently published booklet, ***PeerSpirit Circling for Nursing Leadership***, that Christina Baldwin and I co-authored, we gathered a group of 50 young nurse leaders for a weekend retreat. People come with the expectation that the experience will increase their leadership skills. We provide a program framed around 3 areas: Managing the Business of a Nursing Department, Managing the People, and Creating the Leader Within. Participants are young in their leadership roles, but not necessarily in their age: some have been staff nurses for many years and are venturing into the leadership role in mid-career; some are new nursing graduates who are already certain they want move on to management positions. Facilitated by AONE nurse leaders, and myself, the group tackles sessions on budget, management, and conflict resolution with the great enthusiasm of the new learner.

When we get to Creating the Leader Within, I call this diverse group into their first circle. They have been sitting at tables, classroom style. I ask them to push the tables aside and move their chairs into a large circle. I can feel their anxiety mount as they abandon their safe places at the tables. We are all sitting at the rim, no longer facilitators at a lectern: no more PowerPoint, no more note taking. I describe how a circle works by reviewing the newly released booklet they have each been given. There are no questions.

I have provided a list of twenty reflective questions such as "If you could do anything that you want as a leader, what would it be?" "What are you most afraid of?" "Who do you most admire and why?" "What is stopping you from being the leader you want to be?" I explain the function and use of a talking piece. I ask that they choose and answer one of the questions as the talking piece moves from hand to hand. The first four people pass along the smooth black stone as quickly as they can. Halfway round, one brave young woman breaks the silence by answering a question with a sentence or two. The black stone moves on until it comes quickly back to my hand. My heart worries that they just want to get "the exercise" over and done with.

Circle works: we just have to find the courage to respond to its invitation. Today, I hold the facilitator role, but ten years ago, when I was a younger nurse leader myself, I remember my shock to be asked by a group of colleagues at the Center for Nursing Leadership to hold a talking piece and speak into a receptive silence where no one would interrupt my story and save me from having to say my piece. I take a deep breath and send the talking piece round again.

The first four people continue to pass it on. Halfway around again, a woman changes the tone of the answers and moves from polite professional response to a story about her grandmother that is sad and happy, and deeply personal. And suddenly the conversation deepens, the circle opens and these young leaders begin to understand how their personal histories inform their practice. The insights bring them surprise and meaning. The black stone continues around. The simple answers change to stories of deep-seated worries, fears, hurts, joy, triumph and concerns. I become aware of tearful eyes and tissues being passed while the participants quietly hold respectful space.



The first four no longer pass the stone and their stories are profound teachings in this group. When we look up, we have talked for over two hours. I tell them that we will pass the stone one more time. Personal revelations continue and the sense of trust holds solid. I doubt that these stories have ever been shared, but rather have been tucked away into that deep private space that nurses keep from one another. Together, we learn that circle provides the safe space and the invitation for us to share our authentic selves. All it took to release the real story was the wisdom of one person's grandmother, an elder long gone, and yet very present in the circle.

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.*