



This month's circle tale is an offering from Debra Mowat, a private consultant in Seattle, WA, who focuses her working in helping schools and other organizations develop vision, self-knowledge and skill in communication and inquiry. Thank you Debra.

## **Circle Tale #41, June 2003**

### **Successful Adaptations of Circle**

On Whidbey, in August 2002, I learned about the "bones" of what makes a PeerSpirit circle work well, and I experienced such a circle first hand. I now feel more able to help others build their capacity in group work. I felt encouraged by Christina and Ann to view the circle as something that can be adapted to particular contexts, but at first I found that daunting. My circle tale is about what has felt like successful adaptations.

In a planning session for a staff retreat with a new consultancy, I first used the circle to create a context that would help the group reflect deeply about their goals. Asking the group to sit in a circle (rather than around the table they usually used) was a big step. It set the conversation "apart" from the everyday. Mindful of the connection between circle and the natural world, I asked for fresh flowers at the meeting. I put these flowers on a side table, not in the middle of the circle. But I drew attention to the center of the circle when I talked about group conversation and circle energy. I had the group come up with communication agreements. I wanted "talking stick" discourse at first— a time of no crosstalk and interruption and spoke with them about it. I chose not to use a stick or object, which seemed foreign to their group culture, but the group generally remained mindful of the process. At one point I reminded them about our "virtual talking stick agreement."

"Oh yea, " one person said. "I'm not quite used to this but I think it's a good idea."

My initial question was, "What do you think this organization is asking to be right now?" I was personally moved by their stories and during the break, members commented on the depth of their own responses and listening. At some point in the future I may do more overt circle training/instruction with them, but right now, it is not a package delivery. Indeed at one of our last meetings, the group asked to break out of circle and move to some couches in another room where it was warmer. Still in a kind of circle, we were cozy, almost squished and I momentarily felt defeated. Yet the group members still seemed to hold good boundaries—what Christina and Ann call 'staying in your hoop'. While the move was ostensibly to go to a warmer space, it also informed me as a consultant about the closeness of these group members.

In the visioning retreat which I eventually led, I introduced the use of the Tibetan bells as a way to make note of group experience. During the course of the several-day retreat, each person in the group clinked the bells to honor a significant moment and a few times the chimes were clinked by me and others to stop action that was off course. There were moments of noticing new insights, especially around dreams for the organization. The bell ringing was often accompanied by yelps of excitement, giggles and heightened awareness. Also, the delight in which each person grabbed the bells when needed revealed a great deal to me about how personal leadership is held by these individuals---a core value of the PeerSpirit work that I think already lived in this group.

I felt affirmed in bringing this group the circle form -- not as an outside force imposing it upon them, but as a consultant making a judgment call about how aspects of circle might be useful and complementary to their own values as a group. I don't know if at this organization there will be a time when lighting a candle in the center of the circle or even using circle as an ongoing form in all its depth will happen. But my experience with this group affirms what Christina and Ann taught us -- which is that we bring circle to people respectfully and not rigidly.

I've since then used the circle form in workshops in more of its "Whidbey" form. The joy of this work for me is that creating the bones of the circle is necessary, but can happen in a variety of ways. What is important is that I hold a clear understanding of what makes a circle vital, and I find a way to have the group hold that understanding as well.



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

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