



This month's circle tale is from Elizabeth Soltis, who participated in our Michigan Circle Practicum in the spring of 2003. She traveled to Africa in the summer of 2003 to work at an AIDS hospice. Thank you for your work, and for sharing your story with us.

## **Circle Tale #50, May 2004**

### **Circle in Africa**

Elizabeth Soltis, a world traveling enthusiast from Bright's Grove, Ontario, spent this past summer volunteering in Zambia, a country located in the heart of Africa. Her interest in traveling began during her teenage years with family trips overseas and across North America. Then over time, as Elizabeth traveled to every continent, she began perceiving herself as a global citizen. She discovered that these experiences enriched her understanding, tolerance and compassion for people. So, after reading more about the AIDS pandemic in Africa, Elizabeth decided to volunteer. With that vision in mind, synchronicity kicked in and all the pieces fell into place.

During her two months in Ndola, Zambia, Elizabeth worked at an AIDS hospice called "Cicetekelo", a Bemba word meaning "faith". She worked alongside other Zambians in providing care for those dying of tuberculosis, pneumonia and other opportunistic infections caused by the HIV virus. In this copperbelt region of Zambia, one in three adults are infected with HIV. Interestingly, it was in providing companionship above all else that hospice patients craved. Accustomed to keeping busy, Elizabeth found it refreshingly fulfilling to just be with people, with minimal conversation or even silence. As the nurses reminded her, we are human beings, not human doings. It is our loving energy that can have the greatest impact on others.

In addition to hospice work, Elizabeth also volunteered at a community development project called "Isubilo", meaning "hope". There, she helped with educational programs for seventy orphans, visited patients at home and in the hospital and facilitated an HIV/AIDS support group as they worked on building income-generating businesses. One of the highlights, however, was an invitation she received to facilitate several empowerment workshops, which is the cornerstone of Elizabeth's consulting and training business back home. This transformational experience involves guiding people through a process whereby they define what is meaningful and important to them and then turn around the limiting beliefs that get in the way. During these workshops, Elizabeth used the "circle dialogue" process and principles to provide emotional safety. One by one, people courageously shared their visions and their fears. They passed the "talking piece" around so everyone had an opportunity to speak about their heart's desires and concerns. It took a great deal of humility and strength to access a deeper level of consciousness and share openly and honestly, yet everyone seemed inspired to do so! The Zambians may be poor materialistically, but they are certainly rich in spirit!

Afterwards, Elizabeth reflected on how similar Zambians are to North Americans. The workshop participants, for example, talked about their issues around self-esteem, self-responsibility, trusting in the universe, maintaining a positive attitude and letting go of control, to name a few. We in the west have the same challenges. This experience reinforced Elizabeth's belief that, at the core of our beings, all human beings are the same, regardless of our unique customs and ways of living. As the famous quote states; "We are all of the same spirit, just in different disguises." It is time to embrace the paradox, that in the richness of our world's diversity, we all have similar fears, dreams and needs-- especially the need to give and receive love.

Upon returning home, many people have asked Elizabeth about her most impressionable memories. Simply said, it is the magic of the people. They radiate such innocence and tremendous gratitude, even when they are overwhelmed by their reality. As an example of their "reality", there are now 12 million orphans in Sub-Sahara Africa, corrupt politicians siphon millions from the people, hospitals have limited medicine and only enough food for one meal a day per patient, schools often have no desks nor books



and thousands of children cannot afford a uniform and shoes for school admission. Yet, in spite of these grim circumstances, Zambians remain focused on helping their neighbors and being incredibly thankful for what they do have.

Their modeling has further convinced Elizabeth that global change is connected with individual change. The way to make a positive difference in the world is not by becoming cynical and blaming leaders or systems, but by looking at how our own beliefs, choices and behavior help or hinder the people around us. We need to start at home with our family and with self. As Gandhi so wisely said: "Be the change you want to see in the world."

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

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