



This circle tale by Dr. W. Craig Gilliam, Director of The McFarland Center for Clergy and Congregational Care in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, illustrates how the use of circle can bring peace and goodwill into our lives.

## **Circle Tale #36, November/December 2002**

### **The Talking Turtle**

I am asked to lead a three-day retreat for a religious organization. The purpose is to assist the leadership of the organization in reflecting on their and the organization's behavior. At the retreat, the days are spent in didactic sessions focusing on understanding the organization as an emotional system. In the evenings, after twilight, we call the circle.

To form the circle, we spend time constructing an appropriate center, as if it is our own inner, sacred center we tend to, while at the same time, being attentive to our place at the rim, building a strong container for the coming encounters. Through a ritual, we recognize our ancestors and their presence in and around the circle. A native talking stick made of natural wood is used as the instrument that offers the speaker permission to give voice and the others the ear to listen. A turtle's head is laced on one end of the stick, with the turtle's claw wrapped in leather behind the head of the turtle. Horsetail-hair hangs from the turtle's chin. Turkey feathers are tied to the opposite end of the sacred stick. Where the speaker grips the stick, it is wrapped in deerskin. In the dim light, under the full, round, blue moon, casting its shadow, we talk and listen in the circle to each other and our ancestors.

As we pass the stick, the circle does its work. At first, resistance is present. Some feel fear and discomfort holding the talking stick. They say that it reminds them of a snake, and they are frightened of serpents. I give those who choose the option to put the talking stick on the ground in front of them as they speak. When they finish talking, they are to pick up the stick and pass it to the next person.

When the talking stick comes to the leader of the organization, she comments, "I have chills as I hold this stick, for I have a special affinity with turtles. I have never told a group this before, but tonight I choose to tell you. When I decided to go into ministry, it was because of a dream. The dream through which my call into ministry came was through a talking turtle. In the deep of the night, when I was fast asleep, the turtle, much like this one I grasp, crawled out on my pillow and spoke as if it were divine. It was through this encounter that I experienced my call to ministry, a call for me to find my voice and speak it. Now I sit hear, again seeing and holding the turtle, the turtle that called me to ministry, and again she is asking me to speak my voice."

Through this person's honesty, respect for the turtle, the stick, the circle, and the mysterious ways of life, she blesses the instrument and offers permission for the group to engage and not be afraid. The circle continues for 2 and 1/2 hours. The participants are amazed that in working together for all these years, they never have heard each other's stories nor knew the richness that each person brings to the group.

After the group finishes the circle for the evening and stands to seal it, the committee that planned the retreat announces that a worship service has been previously scheduled. The planners look to me as they announce the service as if they have some question. I pose the question to the group, "Do you want to have a worship service this evening? What do you want to do?" The circle participants respond, "In this circle time, we have just experienced worship in its deepest level. We have been standing on holy ground. Why do we need a service?" They got it. By connecting at that level with each other, somehow, they are connecting with the divine.

Through the circle experience, the world becomes round again. The circle and the full, round, blue moon cast their shadows, tell their stories, and bring forth light.



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

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