



This month's Circle Tale comes to you from Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea.

Circle Tale #54: November 2004 Now What?

Let's start with three breaths, deep round breaths that open the chest and expand the belly. One breath to let go. One breath to get here. One breath to ask: Now what? This little ritual creates a cycle of reflection, reality-check, and readiness. The American election is over, but the struggle is not: now comes the time we vote with our lives.

It's been a long autumn. Political tension has taken a toll on many US citizens. We have been unable to ignore the disintegration of public dialogue, the bold-faced lies, the obfuscation of real issues, and the expenditure of a billion dollars on campaigning in a world where that same amount of money could have done something like eradicate world hunger. News, Internet reports and emails from friends in Europe, Africa, and Pacific nations all indicate how the world has been watching in concern.

We take one breath to let go, to let this intensity rest. It's been an exhausting struggle, and we will need strength to continue to live the values that have driven us into activism. For the next few weeks, we need to balance attention, action and rejuvenation. In the work of citizenship we can breathe a few days and notice what we are feeling, notice how tired we are, play soothing music, make a cup of tea and stare out the window, read some poetry, and turn to Nature for direction. It's November, Nature is in its fallow phase: we can be like the last leaves, the first snow, the bent grasses. Harvest stillness. Watch the phases of the moon.

As we are ready, we take one breath to get here. It's an American habit to absorb major life events with hardly a moment's reflection and move back into busyness. This time, especially, we need to claim "the Now:" we need to stand in the post-election swirl of possibilities. This is uncomfortable for many of us: we want to make a story we can stand in, to plant our surety somewhere. Already the Internet is buzzing: what was the level of voting fraud? Irregular machines? Disenfranchisement? Already the administration moves to escalate the war in Iraq and fulfill its policies. Our job is to be vigilantly here and yet not attach to any single issue in ways that blind us to other possibilities.

Biologists note that when the caterpillar has spun itself into the cocoon and is undergoing the shift that will change it to butterfly, the pupa must surrender itself, become primordial soup and allow the rearrangement of molecules that allow for transformation. What if this is where we are now? What if American society is in that pupa stage? And what if it's going to stay there beyond our lifetimes, deciding what it has the courage and the coding to become? How will we live with that?

We take another breath and ask, "now what?" What are we willing and able to do, right now, to create the country and the world we want to live in? This election has galvanized millions of Americans into the political process and surfaced the ideological and theological splits of a continent. Many of us don't know where to go right now. What if the practice of democracy means holding space for uncertainty? What if we step directly into the split and create a refuge—not an answer, but a resting place for seeing each other and our dilemma as fully as we can? The Sufi poet, Rumi, states: "Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing there is a field... I will meet you there."

That field does not exist in any blue state or red state; it does not exist in any country or religion... it exists only in the human heart. Good news: because we all have a heart, and we can call in that space wherever we are willing to show up and put our hearts into words. We can move forward by creating meeting-places for the heart.



We can step into community-building through little acts of kindness, especially toward those whose bumper stickers express another point of view.

We can design community activities that bring us together around shared values and interests: lawn care and snow removal, roadside clean-up, taking care of isolated elderly or fund-raising for a family with astronomical medical bills. We can reach out to "different" people—someone gay or straight, someone richer or poorer, or folks of another color or religion.

We can reassess our holiday plans. Maybe give to charity and boycott commercialism and engage our families in conversations about simplicity that honor the holy/days more than the holidays.

We can practice sustainability: walk and bicycle more, ride public transit, consolidate errands, buy gas-efficient or hybrid vehicles, recycle, shop at thrift stores, start a garden.

If we belong to a faith community, now is the time to keep that community involved in relevant action, to resist hatred and prejudice, and to hold the boundary between church and state.

We can expand the conversation. Check in with those we know are grieving: "How are you doing? How is your heart?" We can find allies and buoy up each other's spirits and determination. We can ask those who voted differently, "Why did you make that choice? What do you hope will happen now? How might we work together?"

There is a growing movement to keep public dialogue alive. PeerSpirit has guidelines (downloadable on the home page of our website: www.peerspirit.com) for calling circle-based conversations. Check out www.conversationcafe.org which uses components of circle to initiate conversations in coffeehouses (now an international phenomenon) or look at www.letstalkamerica.org, which is initiating a monthly 'let's talk' day focused on where to from here.

But conversation doesn't require a national movement, just a little courage. Right after the election, two friends simply found a free public space, named a day, a time, and began inviting anyone interested to show up. Do not fall silent: Democracy is dialogue. And dialogue occurs whenever our hearts are open to each other, even in our differences.

That is what gives us hope, not the stridency, but the courage to show each other what is real about us: how we hurt, what we long for, how hard it is to live a good life. To show each other our determination to stay involved in what matters to us, to do honorable work, to lay tracks for our children and their children, to find joy in the everyday.

There is a field for the heart, and we will find each other there. We will circle up and carry on.

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.*