



This month's Circle Tale was written by Ann Linnea and Christina Baldwin, founders of PeerSpirit, Inc. and co-authors of the upcoming title, *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair* (Berrett-Koehler, March 2010).

Circle Tale, November 2009

Using the Circle as a Way of Blessing

"The bowl in the middle of our gathering contains strips of blank paper," explained our friend. "I invite us to pull out several and write the names of people we are holding in prayer."

In all the ways that circle can enrich gatherings of people, the use of ceremony is one of the sweetest. Within or outside of traditional religious practices, a desire to offer blessing rises up for many of us as we hear of each other's sorrows and concerns. We want to know what is going on in one another's hearts—in personal circles, and in circles of colleagues—as it makes our relationships stronger.

In silence, each of the nine women in this annual retreat wrote down the names of anyone and any situation that came to mind. After several minutes, we rang the tingsha bells and our friend continued. "We'll now pass around the bowl and you may read the name on one slip of paper and share a bit about that circumstance—or you may deposit prayers silently. We'll continue passing the bowl around until all the slips of paper are gathered."

A litany of concerns poured into the center of our circle: a sister-in-law's diagnosis of breast cancer, a son recovering from a car accident, a friend in a challenging divorce, a neighbor being laid off, concern for the world's children, courage at the upcoming Global Climate Summit in Denmark. When all petitions had been spoken, we rose from our chairs and spontaneously offered songs, prayers, and drumming to gather the energy for holding these concerns. The prayer bowl remained in our center throughout this gathering.

Having experienced the power of blessing in many personal circles, we have been encouraged to suggest ceremony and blessing in professional settings as well. While this initially seems to jump beyond business as usual, including appropriate moments of ceremonial tending among business colleagues has been well received. This fall, for example, during a two-day training with a council of nurse administrators, we offered a fire ceremony (we were in a rural retreat center) of letting go of the past and welcoming in the present. Ceremonial circle can add meaning to many ordinary events—such as the gatherings about to occur during the upcoming American Thanksgiving holiday.

For years, we have invited friends and family to arrive several hours before the traditional dinner and to create a collage placemat that represents their current gratitude and petitions. With the smells of roasting turkey wafting in from the kitchen and seated around the warmth of the wood stove, people nibble appetizers while looking through magazines and cutting out and pasting images. About an hour before dinner, we gather into a circle around the hearth. People share their collages and stories. In a group that may not see each other much during the year, this annual check-in creates initial connection for our social conversations. As a result of the opening circle, we know each other well enough to speak and listen with informed hearts.

The actual ceremonies of a blessing circle are best kept simple. Their strength, delight, and meaning come from what is called into a sense of collective heartfulness. As we move through the holidays contained in a year, as we move through gatherings where knowing one another's burdens and blessings is helpful, the ceremonial aspects of circle are available to help us deepen our experience.

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. Your e-mail address will **not** be shared or used by anyone other than PeerSpirit, and you can unsubscribe yourself at any time.*