



Our circle tale this month comes from Jim Neale, an alum of this summer's Whidbey Circle Practicum, and Director of Organizational Development at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Jim consults privately with public and not-for-profit agencies.

After the Practicum, Jim went home and applied his new skills in a most creative and effective manner. In this moment when the world is watching the US to see us choose new government, we offer Jim's story in honor of so many people in public service who keep our communities and countries functioning. Thank you, Jim - and all.

Circle Tale, October 2008

A Recreation Trail for Motorized and Non-Motorized Users

As a consultant, I regularly play the role of helping people in organizations envision the results that are important to them, map out how they'll achieve them, and in the process, expand capabilities. I'm having the most fun when helping diverse groups work collaboratively to create something really worthwhile together.

For the past several years, residents of a small agricultural village in the area (established in 1674, population of 600) have struggled with the question of whether an abandoned rail line running through the community should be open to use by motorized vehicles (ATV's, snow mobiles). Many were opposed believing the community was better served by preserving a serene space suitable for more physically active pursuits and safe for the many seniors to walk. Others favored motorized use, wanting to access hundreds of kilometers of other trails open to vehicles, to boost tourism in the region and to provide an alternative form of recreation. The issue had created a palpable rift in the community.

Discussions began to take place mostly amongst small special-interest groups. In any "mixed" sessions, residents faced aggressive oppositional views and quickly fell silent. No progress was made over 9 months. The community lapsed into frustration, further polarization, exhaustion and the belief that a good resolution wasn't possible.

I was asked to assist – to develop a process for the conversations and then facilitate them – hopefully producing a consensus (it would never be unanimous) view for trail use and for how to begin the healing.

Having just returned from a PeerSpirit Practicum fully jazzed about the fruits of circle and eager to give it a try, I was game to experiment... but was careful to harmonize the approach with the more conservative nature of the community. I developed a process that included:

1. consultations with community representatives to envision the kind of community they wanted - to establish the more fundamental and common intention for the community – what emerged was a clear desire for a strong and united community, honoring its long traditions of neighbours-helping-neighbours
2. a series of 3 circles - one for each of 3 primary special-interest groups:
 - (a) individuals who owned land adjacent to the trail who would be most impacted by the decision,
 - (b) hikers and
 - (c) motorized vehicle users-- where folks could become comfortable expressing their views without concern about confrontation
3. a fourth circle for the entire community, where the practiced views could be brought forward for the benefit of the whole
4. in each we...



Life & Leadership through Circle, Quest & Story

- established a centre that reflected the shared vision for their community we'd developed earlier and an antique bowl (representing the long & colorful history of the village) that began empty to represent the "fresh start"
- spent a little time at the beginning, role-playing some of the behaviours they might expect to see as they addressed this emotional issue (quiet anger, rage, protectiveness of more frail residents, etc.) - it gave them a chance to put the behaviours they were concerned about out front, ham it up and laugh a little, become more ready to recognize them and then practice calling for the bell -- and together we explored what folks could say that would contribute positively to how the conversation would proceed
- invited participants, throughout the process, to write their hopes, concerns and ideas for healing on small cards and deposit them in the center bowl – in part this was to provide a private and very safe avenue to express views (which proved to be very important to some of the more senior participants) but also, as the bowl filled, the intention grew in strength, scope, importance, and to my amazement, converged toward a more shared aspiration for the village

One of the participants, an elderly woman with terminal cancer, lives very close to the trail. The quieted environment needed for her care appeared incompatible with motorized use. Many of the residents had become involved in this issue to protect her right to live in a health-preserving setting. As she spoke in the circle, we could feel the collective resolve build to ensure, whatever it took, this citizen would be well cared for. As she continued with her story, it became clear that the rift in the community was also a cause of pain for her and that her deepest wish was for reconciliation and healing. For that reason, she was going to support re-opening the trail to vehicles. She offered a clear and present challenge to the circle – one that compelled compromise and creativity to find the best possible solution. It was a magnificent break-through moment.

Closing the trail to motorized use would exclude members of the community from a commons and was therefore not consistent with the vision they held of a united community. Opening the trail to people they had shared hopes with and, through the conversations, had demonstrated a genuine sensitivity for the concerns and sincere commitment to behave as "good and conscientious neighbours" became the only acceptable conclusion.

The session went exceptionally well – like nothing residents (or I) had experienced before when addressing divisive issues within a small, close and very conservative community. A strong consensus view emerged, there are new and better understandings, beginnings of real forgiveness, a fresh faith they can work together to bring about a good end result, and acceptance of the need to move forward even when some are going to be disappointed by the outcome. Circle provided an extremely powerful alternative to conversations of self-interest– one that reinforced the ties that bind.

A piece I've left out until now is that the owner of the actual rail bed, and the one who commissioned this process, was our provincial Department of Natural Resources. Since reporting the results, my concern has been that the Minister, a political representative, might choose to decide in favour of more powerful minority interests and not fulfill the consensus wishes of the community. In that case, dynamics would not simply revert to the previous state – they'd be worse. Having raised the expectations, making a political choice would deepen distrust of government and the malaise of residents. This would be a concern in any organizationally based circle work I can imagine doing, where group progress is over-turned by a higher authority – even worse if it's for poor reasons.

I've just learned that the consensus recommendation has been accepted, the trail has been re-opened and the journey forward can begin.

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