



This month's Circle Tale is written by Canadian colleague Heather Plett. Heather is a writer, teacher, leadership mentor, conversation host, and edge-walker. She became self-employed last year after spending thirteen years in leadership positions in government and non-profit. She is especially interested in exploring how feminine wisdom can impact our leadership paradigms, and she blogs about that subject. Check out her blog at <http://sophialeadership.com/>. Heather is married with three daughters, and she makes her home in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

Thank you Heather for sharing your story!

Circle Tale, October 2011

A Tale of Two Circles

Eleven years ago, I felt like I was floundering in a dark place, working as a communications manager in a toxic environment with few models for effective leadership.

Then one day I stumbled on the work of Christina and Ann, and I could almost smell the sulfur as they struck a match to light a candle for me. Leadership in circles? What a revolutionary thought! I read everything I could get my hands on and started dreaming of a better way.

Fast forward eleven years and I am now self-employed as a writer, teacher, and leadership mentor. Last year I had the pleasure of studying with Christina at *The Listening Well* workshop and was able to thank her for that candle in the dark.

A month later, I started teaching my first writing class in the professional development program at the local university. Galvanized by my experience with Christina and the other women, I entered the classroom determined to bring circle into the way I taught. I started by ringing the bell at the beginning of class, I began each session with a check-in, and as much as I could, I tried to teach from a place in the circle rather than a hierarchical position at the front of the room.

I wish I could say it was a roaring success. It wasn't. To start with, though it was a brand new building, it had been designed and furnished by people whose view of education was traditional and rigid. The furniture could barely be re-arranged and we were stuck in bare white boxy classrooms with essentially no natural light.

Worse than the restrictive space, though, was the general attitude (among administrators, students, and other teachers) that education is based on hierarchies and structures that shouldn't be messed with too dramatically. Each time I deviated from the norm (and I did that quite regularly, whether or not it was about introducing circle), I was reminded by the students how different I was from other teachers. Some said it with appreciation, others did not. (One even went so far as to say that I should leave the teaching up to people who knew how to do it.)

The greatest challenge by far, though, was that my students were mostly reluctant writers who were in my classes simply to fill a required credit and didn't want to go very deeply with their writing. Circle brought too much ambiguity for them. They wanted clarity - straightforward lectures and crisp templates they could fit their writing assignments into to ensure top marks. I had a hard time convincing them there are no formulas for good writing.

In the end, I had to be satisfied with bringing the spirit of circle (and some of the elements, such as the check-in at the beginning) into the way I taught, even though the actual circle didn't visibly show up.

I couldn't stop thinking, though, that there must be a better way.



The story of Azar Nafisi in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* kept coming back to me. Refusing to submit to the university's rules about wearing a veil, and fed up by the fact that the school banned many of the books that she loved and had spent her life studying, she went underground. Inviting her brightest female students to her house, she started a secret book club where controversial books were discussed. The book club quickly became a community where young women could speak their truth without fearing for their safety.

If Nafisi could take such a bold step away from the traditional education system, in a place where she risked her life to do so, why couldn't I take a similar (though much less risky) step toward the kind of teaching I believed in?

As summer drew to a close and I looked forward to two months away from the university before my classes started again in late Fall, I knew the time was right to leap. I rented a room at a local church, made a poster to hang in neighbourhood libraries, and sent out an email inviting people to sign up for "Creative Writing for Self Discovery", an eight week class. Before long, eight people had signed up - the perfect number for an intimate circle.

During our first gathering, I gave a brief explanation of the circle and the elements that were involved - the candle, talking piece, and bell. Looking around the room, I saw a few surprised faces, but mostly I saw excitement and a sense that they had come to a comfortable place.

Before that first class had ended, each of us in the circle had shared at least one personal story from a place of vulnerability and trust. The circle held us and we held each other. By the second class, we were a community.

The honesty and depth of the stories increased with each sharing. We heard of the loss of the dream of motherhood. We heard of relationships breaking apart. We heard of confusion and pain. We heard the stories we rarely dare to share with those we rub shoulders with day after day.

I went home at the end of each class feeling humbled and honoured to be able to sit at the rim of such an incredible circle.

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.*