

---

## *Let's Circle Up*

# **The Peacemaking Circle**

The Peacemaking Circle is a process that should be experienced firsthand rather than studied, but there are some specific descriptions that can give a preliminary understanding of the process. A list of sources for quotes, further reading, web resources, and acknowledgements appear at the end of this handout.

## **Peacemaking Circles Overview**

- "Peacemaking Circles are a method of communication and problem solving derived from aboriginal and native traditions. Circles are used in relationship development, healing, community building, and restorative justice efforts." (Boyes-Watson 2001, p. 16)
- "Peacemaking Circles bring together the ancient wisdom of community and the contemporary value of respect for the individual in a process which honors the presence and dignity of every participant, values their contributions, emphasizes the connectedness of all things, supports emotional and spiritual expression, and gives equal voice to all." (Pranis 2001, p. 1)
- "Circles bring us together to share who we are beyond our appearances. They're places of listening—of hearing what it's like to be someone else. They're also places for being heard—for expressing what's on our minds and hearts and having others receive it deeply." (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, p. 3)

## **Key Elements of the Circle**

"The keepers, the talking piece, the guidelines, the ceremonies, and the decision-making by consensus—provide the outer frame, or structure, for the process. The inner frame of Circles—the values, the principles, and the Medicine Wheel teaching of balance—constitute the core philosophy that grounds Circles in a healing, constructive approach." (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, p. 125)

1. Ceremony
2. Guidelines
3. Talking Piece
4. Keeping the Circle
5. Consensus Decision-Making

## **Stages of Circle**

"To convey the importance of taking time to build relationships among participants, Harold Gatensby, a Tlingit First Nations Circle practitioner and teacher, identifies four components of the Circle inspired by the Medicine Wheel. These four components—getting acquainted, building understanding and trust, addressing issues or visions, and developing a plan of action—are equally important and so warrant relatively equal time." (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, p. 141)



## Circle Guidelines

- “Far from being rigid rules, Circle guidelines represent a dynamic consensus that responds to the changing circumstances of how participants want to be together.” (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, p. 113)
- “Guidelines reflect the values and principles of the Circle process, both in their content (what they say) and in their relationship to participants (how they’re used).” (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, p. 103)
- “The following six guidelines are essential for Circle dialogues: respect the talking piece; speak from the heart; speak with respect; listen with respect; remain in the Circle; and honor confidentiality.” (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, p. 106)

## Circle Keepers/Facilitators

- “Keepers are the caretakers of the Circle process. They facilitate the Circle dialogue, protect the integrity of the Circle process, and open/close the Circle.” (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, p. 82)
- “Keepers help hold a space that’s clear, open, respectful, and free. They do so principally by trusting the Circle process to draw out the wisdom of participants . . . [K]eepers create an environment that encourages participants to share what’s within them in ways they may not otherwise do.” (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, pp. 82–83)
- “Keepers are really servants of the Circle. They do not run the Circle; they serve the Circle. It’s not a position of power; it is a responsibility to others.” (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, p. 84)

## The Talking Piece

- “By allowing only the person holding the talking piece to speak, a Circle regulates the dialogue as the piece circulates consecutively from person to person around the group. The person holding the talking piece has the undivided attention of everyone else in the Circle and can speak without interruption. The use of the talking piece allows for full expression of emotions, deeper listening, thoughtful reflection, and an unhurried pace. Additionally, the talking piece creates space for people who find it difficult to speak in a group, but it never requires the holder to speak.” (Pranis, 2005, p. 12)
- “Everything in the Circle is an invitation—when you have the talking piece you are invited to speak, but you may pass. When you do not have the talking piece, you are invited to listen.” (Lewis, 2003, p. 4)
- “The talking piece is passed to facilitate and share speaking time. No one speaks without the talking piece and the talking piece goes around until all have had their say.” (Lewis, 2003, p. 4)
- “The talking piece promotes dialogue, affirms equality, slows the pace, develops listening skills, cultivates peacemaking abilities, fosters honesty, and supports conditions for consensus.” (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, 2003, p. 100)



## Opening the Circle

- "Circles have rituals for opening, for discussing problems and solutions, and for closing. The opening ritual marks the sacredness of the Circle and prepares everyone to be there in a good way." (Boyes-Watson, 2001, p. 20)
- "Opening and closing ceremonies mark the time and space of the Circle as a space apart. It is a distinctly different space because the Circle invites people to be in touch with the value of connecting deeply with others, and it encourages people to drop the ordinary masks and protections that create distance from others." (Pranis, 2005, p. 33)
- "Opening ceremonies help participants shift gears from the pace and tone of ordinary life to the pace and tone of the Circle. Opening ceremonies help participants to center themselves, be reminded of core values, clear negative energies from unrelated stresses, encourage a sense of optimism, and honor the presence of everyone there." (Pranis, 2005, p. 33)
- "Openings are intended to help us shift our focus from our separateness to our relatedness. Good Circle openings invite us into a space where personal values count, where it's okay to express intense feelings, where spiritual experiences aren't dismissed, where seeking meaning in our lives matters, and where mutual respect, understanding, and trust are shared priorities." (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge 2003, p. 135)

## Closing the Circle

- "The closing of a Circle is as important as its opening, and it can have multiple parts as well. To close the gathering in 'a good way,' the keepers review points of agreement and disagreement; participants share their final views and what they see as next steps; then the keepers initiate a closing round of reflection and introduce a closing ceremony." (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge 2003, p. 145)
- "Closing ceremonies acknowledge the efforts of the Circle, affirm the interconnectedness of those present, convey a sense of hope for the future, and prepare participants to return to the ordinary space of their lives. Opening and closing ceremonies are designed to fit the nature of the particular group and provide opportunities for cultural responsiveness." (Pranis, 2005, p. 34)



## How Circles Work

- "Circles assume a universal human wish to be connected to others in a good way. The values of a Circle derive from this basic human impulse. Therefore, values that nurture and promote good connections to others are the foundation of the Circle." (Pranis, 2005, p. 24)
- "Circles are a values-led and profoundly democratic, egalitarian and spiritual process. The Circle process intentionally creates a sacred space which helps to lift barriers between people and open up fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration and mutual understanding." (Roca, Inc., circa 2003)
- "The Circle process is a gentle invitation to change one's relationship to oneself, to the community and to the wider universe. It offers an awakening of connection and purpose beyond the myriad of differences that keep people apart and in conflict with one another." (Boyes-Watson, 2001, p. 18)
- "Circles are about practicing a new way to be in the world. They are about incrementally shifting habits and practicing to be in a different way with one another and ourselves. Circles develop skills at participation, consensus, shared leadership, and problem solving, all of which are all essential tools for genuine democracy and social justice. But Circles go deeper than that. They touch us at our spiritual core and help us see ourselves as part of a connected whole." (Boyes-Watson, 2001, p. 21)

## Reflecting on the Circle Experience: Circle Prompts for Self-Reflection

1. Being in Circle is mostly listening. How is this experience of mostly listening for you? How is the experience of being listened to without interruption? What sorts of inner shifts does being in a space of listening and being heard elicit for you?
2. Intentionally reflecting on the values a group wants to bring to a Circle dialogue is key to Circle practice. How much do you normally think about values? How might intentionally reflecting on values in a group contribute to having a good dialogue? What might be a practical benefit?
3. Circles offer an invitation to participate; participation is always voluntary. How does this non-coercive practice affect your feelings about being in Circle? How does it increase the likelihood of a positive Circle experience?
4. Indigenous people as well as long-time Circle practitioners often talk about Circles less as a technique and more as a way of life. What do you think about that? What might this mean in your experience and how you engage your relationships?

---

## Sources for Quotes and Further Reading:

- Baldwin, Christina. *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. Newberg, OR: Swan-Raven Company, 1994; Reprint 1998. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1998.
- Ball, Jennifer, Wayne Caldwell, and Kay Pranis. *Doing Democracy with Circles: Engaging Communities in Public Planning*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2010.
- Bolen, Jean Shinoda. *The Millionth Circle—How to Change Ourselves and the World: The Essential Guide to Women’s Circles*. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1999.
- Boyes-Watson, Carolyn. “Healing the Wounds of Street Violence: Peacemaking Circles and Community Youth Development.” *CYD Journal*, Volume 2, No. 4 (2001): pp. 16–21.
- . *Holding the Space: The Journey of Circles at Roca*. Boston, MA: The Center for Restorative Justice at Suffolk University, 2002.
- . *Peacemaking Circles and Urban Youth: Bringing Justice Home*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2008.
- Boyes-Watson, Carolyn, and Kay Pranis. *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, and Somerville, MA: Institute for Restorative Initiatives, 2015, Revised 2020.
- Engel, Beverly. *Women Circling the Earth: A Guide to Fostering Community, Healing, and Empowerment*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2000.
- Garfield, Charles, Cindy Spring, and Sedonia Cahill. *Wisdom Circles: A Guide to Self-Discovery and Community Building in Small Groups*. New York: Hyperion, 1998.
- Lewis, Greg. “Teaching and Learning in Circle.” *Conflict Management in Higher Education Report*, Volume 3, No. 2 (2003): pp. 1–6.
- Pranis, Kay. “Going Around in Circles.” *Hearts & Hands: Minnesota’s Restorative Justice Newsletter*, Winter/Spring 1 (2001): pp. 1–6.
- . *The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005.
- Pranis, Kay, Barry Stuart, and Mark Wedge. *Peacemaking Circle: From Conflict to Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2003.
- Riestedberg, Nancy. *Circle in the Square: Building Community and Repairing Harm in School*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2012.
- Thalhuber, Patricia, B.V.M., and Susan Thompson. *Building a Home for the Heart: Using Metaphors in Value-Centered Circles*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2007.
- Valandra, Edward C. *Colorizing Circle Practices: Naming the Silences*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2024.
- . *Colorizing Restorative Justice: Voicing Our Realities*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2020.