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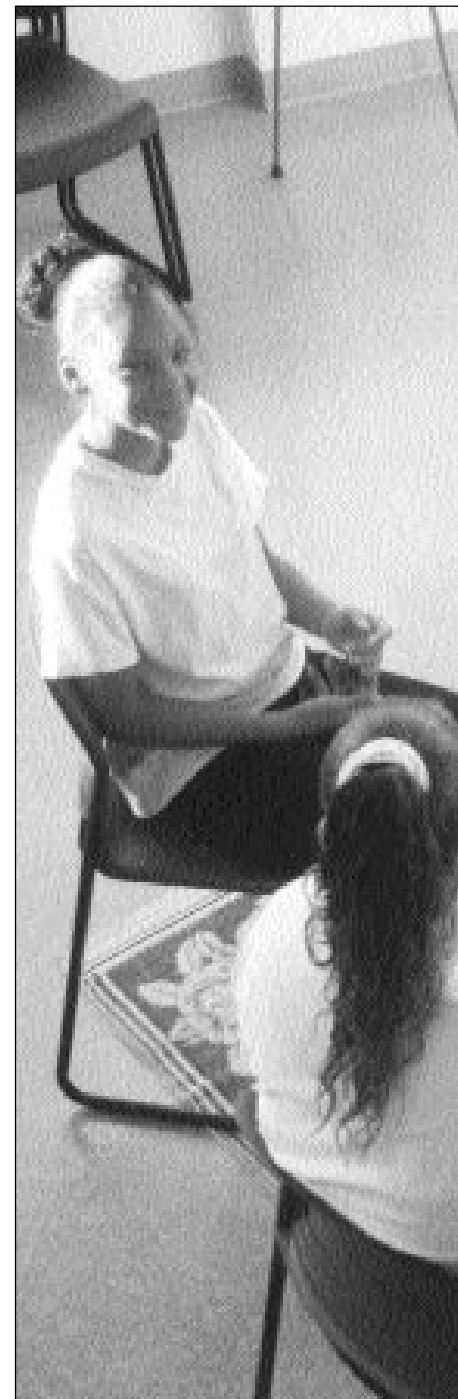
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In the Face of Hate Crimes
Healing the Wounds of Street Violence
Lifting New Voices for Socially Just Communities

Healing the Wounds of Street Violence

Peacemaking Circles and Community Youth Development

Peacemaking circles, a method of communication and problem solving derived from aboriginal and native traditions, are used in relationship development, healing, community building, and restorative justice efforts. This article highlights how circles are used at Roca—a multicultural, youth, family, and community development organization—to open up fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration, and mutual understanding between youth and adult participants.





Young women's support circle

A huge banner in the circular town meeting space proudly proclaims the philosophy of the peace-making circle: a tradition that has entered into the heart and soul of Roca, a community and youth development organization located in the cities of Chelsea and Revere, Massachusetts.¹ Roca's mission is to promote justice through creating opportunities with young people and families to lead healthy and happy lives. Roca serves youth and families of African-American, Central and

South American, Cambodian, Cape Verdean, Moroccan, Puerto Rican, Haitian, and white-ethnic heritage, as well as newcomers from the war-torn countries of Bosnia, Somalia, and Sudan. The unspoken anguish of social injustice is chronic for many of these young people who bear the burdens of generations of oppression and violence as well as current wounds of racism, homophobia, sexism, poverty, and social inequality.

In this diverse setting, people from all backgrounds,

ages, and cultures come together to learn the tradition of the peacemaking circle—a ritual developed by the leaders of the First Nation tribes.

At the heart of Roca's embrace of circles is a powerful Native American insight:

You can't get to a good place in a bad way.

This mantra adorns the walls of Roca in every corner of the building. Some people even add an emphatic "ever!" to the end of the sentence. The goal—to "be in a good way" with each other—has permeated the culture of the organization. The lesson is simple but not easy. To be peacemakers, Roca must learn new ways of coming together so that everyone is connected, heard, respected, and treated as an important and valued part of the community. Being in a good way means a shift in relationships with police, the district attorney's office, school administrators, and city officials who, for disadvantaged youth, are traditionally seen as adversaries in the struggle for social justice.

What Is the Peacemaking Circle?

If you want to tell a story about how we [in circle] are changing other people, that's the easy story to tell. What we're really doing, though, is changing ourselves.

—Michael Glennon, Victim Advocate, Suffolk District Attorney's Office

The circle process is about change. Too often we focus on asking other people to change. At Roca, the circle has helped us to understand that the only person you really get to change is yourself. 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.

The circle is neither a solution to our problems nor a magic wand that makes all our problems instantly disappear. It is more like a missing piece of social technology,

Circle Trainings: A Learning Journey

In February 1999, Roca began a journey of learning with a four-day basic circle training led by six key teachers: Mark Wedge, First Nations leader from the Yukon; Harold Gatensby, First Nations leader from the Yukon; Judge Barry Stuart, chief justice of the Yukon Territorial Court; Don Johnson, assistant district attorney from Minnesota; Kay Pranis, restorative justice planner from the Minnesota Department of Correction; and Gwen Chandler-Rhivers, community leader in circles from Minnesota. For four days 40 people—staff, young people, police officers, probation officers, clergy, parents, and community members—gathered to learn about circles and the possibilities they hold for bringing people together in a good way.

The Chelsea/Revere Peacemaking Planning Committee was formed in the aftermath of the first basic four-day training at the request of an ever-widening circle of young people, parents, criminal justice professionals, youth workers, religious leaders, educators, human service

professionals, and interested community members. Twice a month the committee comes together to learn about, develop, and implement peacemaking circles in their neighborhoods. Their vision is to create a united community where diverse people participate to address critical issues, resolve conflict, and establish new ways of communicating about challenging and important issues.

Between the first training in February 1999 and July 2001, Roca has hosted seven four-day core circle trainings, four additional "keeper" or facilitator trainings, and numerous coaching sessions including a bilingual session in Spanish and English. More than 200 people have participated in the basic training and more than 100 have spent additional time in coaching sessions and keeper trainings. Among this group are at least 102 Roca young people and staff, 8 justice system employees, 23 youth service workers, 8 police officers, 10 restorative justice professionals, and 31 community members.

Sixteen months down the road from the first training, approximately 500 community people have sat in a circle. Roca and its community

partners are using circles everywhere—from programming with young people to staff and board meetings; from schools to a Department of Youth Services day reporting center; from a youth detention facility to a county jail. There are more than 20 ongoing weekly and monthly circles throughout the Roca organization. There are support circles, healing circles, talking circles, criminal justice circles, and circles for problem solving, advocacy, and program development. Some examples follow:

- Members of the Cambodian community met with the mayor of Revere to discuss cultural differences.
- Young people and Revere's high school principal came together to discuss the issue of dropping out of school.
- Gang-involved youth sat in circle with Revere police, with members of opposing gangs, and with former gang members to explore pressing issues.



Mark Wedge, First Nations Leader from the Yukon, speaking about the power of circles at a community event.

which enables us to tap into a latent capacity for wisdom, collective support, and insight. The peacemaking circle is a process that ROCA participants call “simple, but not easy.” It involves more than simply “rearranging the furniture”: it is a profoundly democratic, egalitarian, and spiritual values-led process. The circle intentionally creates a sacred space, which helps to remove barriers between people and open up fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration, and mutual understanding. The circle creates a space that gently liberates a truth locked away in our hearts: we all want to be loved.

The Medicine Wheel

The Medicine Wheel teaches us about interconnectedness between:²

- The four cycles of life—infancy, adolescence, adulthood, and old age
- The four seasons—winter, spring, summer, and autumn
- The four essential elements of the earth—wind, fire, rain, and earth
- The four directions—north, south, east, and west
- The four races of the planet
- The four elements of the human being—the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual

The teachings hold that each of these elements is part

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There is a very big difference [between] being told you are equal and feeling and seeing you are equal . . . the circle looks and feels like a place of genuine equality.

—Molly Baldwin, Executive Director, ROCA

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of a whole, an essential part of our natural existence, and each is held in balance with each other around a sacred fire.

In many Native American cultures, a person who is acting out or harming others is “out of balance”; if one person is out of balance, so too is the community. Similarly, the understanding in a circle is that a problem for one is a problem for all. We are all connected and the wisdom of the circle teaches us that

we all must move to restore balance. No one person—no problem—is ever put in the middle of the circle for all to blame, to judge, to correct, or even to help.

The circle process itself, like each of the elements in the preceding list, features four interdependent and continuous phases or stages, which draw upon the wisdom of the Native American tradition of the Medicine Wheel.

Opening and Closing “In a Good Way”: The Importance of Rituals

Ritual and ceremony are nonverbal, almost subconscious forms of collective communication that develop and affirm shared understanding. On a daily basis we unconsciously participate in rituals of power that reinforce hierarchies of control and continually remind us of our place in stratified systems of inequality. Think of the classroom with its podium of authority, all eyes focused on the adult who holds the sacred power of speech. With the point of a finger, the teacher demands speech or silence, dictating who is to speak, when, and what about. Or consider the ritual of the courtroom where the judge, clothed

in robes, is elevated above the rest—with lawyers and their clients separated from the community by a bar or railing. The defendant, or “problem,” sits alone, isolated from their community, to be judged by a panel of strangers. Schools, courtrooms, and workplaces are full of rituals and degrading ceremonies that reinforce the silencing, exclusion, and subordination of young people.

A ritual is not just a passive experience: when we perform rituals we are “being” and “doing” our social order. When we sit “in circle,” we are being in a different way with one another. Circle rituals are a way of creating a space for new behaviors, which extend beyond the circle itself. The rituals affirm a social order based on inclusiveness, equality, and respect for all participants. Everyone is an equal part of the whole; there is no head, no hierarchy, no one sitting on the outside. In the circle, we face each other as human beings, leaving behind the titles that signify position outside and using first names only. There is neither a table to hide behind nor a corner of the room to retreat to. Each participant is given equal respect and all are encouraged to speak from their own hearts and experiences.

Just as the phases of the Medicine Wheel are marked by certain ceremonies and rituals, circles also 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. Traditional native practices include burning sage in a cleansing ritual, which purifies and marks entry into a different kind of space. At Roca we draw on this ritual to help us move from our usual habits of engagement (or nonengagement) and to develop new patterns of listening, speaking from the heart, and feeling compassion for oneself and for others. Vichey, a young adult leader at Roca, describes the sage ritual like this:

It's a little bit hard with the ritual we have, with the tradition of the sage; it's a little weird. But after the first circle, we feel very comfortable . . . Okay, this is cool, people are listening. At first it is weird, people sitting “in circle,” getting up, holding hands. Especially among the guys, teen guys, it's very hard to hold hands and not giggle or say aloud, “this is weird.” It's very hard at first, but after they go through it, they get a sense of belonging, they feel sort of relaxed.

An opening or closing ritual may be a poem, a piece of music, or a moment of silence. The closing of a circle is marked by a ceremony, in order to close a circle in a good way. Opening and closing rituals often involve holding hands—a moment of embarrassment and awkwardness at first for young people from the street as well as for their tough counterparts, the police. Like the sage ritual, which may feel strange at first, the holding of hands helps to open space for new ways of acting and thus becoming.

The Guidelines

The circle process is guided by a set of values or guidelines, formulated by the participants as a kind of covenant

for how they will conduct themselves while in the circle. Creating guidelines can be time-consuming, but the process is well worth the effort. In this early phase, participants are grappling with reaching consensus, shared leadership, the need to have compassion for one another, and balancing conflicting values and needs.

Consider, for instance, the issue of confidentiality. What may be said in the circle often brings up a conflict between the norms of human service and justice professionals—who feel they must take certain actions to keep young people

safe—and the expectations of young people and the community—who feel they must have some guarantee of privacy in order to *feel* safe. Consequently, before other dialogues can begin, it is important to “talk about how we will talk to one another” and to build the mutual trust so essential to the circle process.

The Talking Piece

I pretty much can't talk in front of people so the circle gives me confidence and makes me feel comfortable about myself to just be myself and just talk. That's what I like about it most. The circle gives me that safe zone to open up and talk. People are there to listen, I can express myself and talk about whatever the circle is based on. In the circle I feel secure. People get to express whatever [they have] to say, they have a voice. At a meeting, people just sort of lash out and say whatever they want and some people don't [do] the same amount of talking or express the same amount.

—Vichey, Young Adult Leader at ROCA



Samuel Kuadiet speaking during a circle.

One of the most transformative elements of the circle is the use of a talking piece. Traditionally an eagle feather, the talking piece also can be a rock, stick, Bible, or any other object with special meaning. The talking piece moves in a clockwise direction, the same way the earth moves around the sun. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak and they are free to pass the piece along if they choose. The keeper begins by sending the talking piece around the circle, usually raising a question or topic. They may summarize what has been said or start another round when it returns full circle. Keepers circulate the talking piece until there is a sense that all perspectives or emotions have been aired. People who pass initially are aware that they will have another chance when the talking piece goes around again. Keepers may also hold the talking piece, suspend it, or direct it to particular individuals under special circumstances.

The use of the talking piece, guided by the values of the circle, creates a profoundly different environment in which to speak and be heard—particularly for those who have been silenced in our society. While new participants may initially feel scared or unsettled by the practice, this feeling gradually is transformed into a growing sense of confidence and satisfaction. Not only does everyone have an opportunity to contribute, but when they do speak, the entire community is paying attention. Furthermore, because participants are safe to speak without pressure, they don't worry about interruptions. Through this process people relax and often listen to one another for the first time.

Healing Our Wounds and the Quest for Social Justice

Certain circles are pretty hard. In the healing circle I go through every Saturday, it's a little bit hard because I share deep stuff about my life and people that are in the circle that are supporting me and seeing what they feel about me . . . it's a little bit difficult because you don't [normally] share personal stuff. And sometimes I do break down and cry and that's a new thing for me. At first I didn't feel very comfortable explaining myself but then as the healing circle goes on, everyone is sharing and everyone knows a little bit of each other.

—Vichey, Young Adult Leader at ROCA

The circle, through its rituals and values, creates a safe space for the sharing of difficult and painful emotions. The values of the circle encourage participants to speak from the heart, a pathway that often is blocked by many layers of hurt and anger. Young people on the street carry heavy secret burdens of the violence in their lives. They live in families and communities damaged by the wounds inflicted by war or by their status as refugees, affected by the violence of poverty and pervasive institutional racism

in this country. They are taught to hide their pain, numb it with drugs or sex, and lash out to relieve some of the explosive anger.

The circle can be a place of healing for these wounds that run deep in the fabric of the community. In the circle everyone shares some of their own vulnerability—and it is through that process that people who are isolated find connection and begin healing. Being able to sit with the pain—to acknowledge it and accept the reality of it—often frees people from its crippling effects and enables participants to make changes in their own lives and in their community.

The search for social justice by peaceful means is often undermined by the tremendous rage and hurt carried in the hearts of those who have been oppressed. How can we talk calmly—in a good way—about what is painful and unjust? How can we abandon the tool of anger to motivate a struggle for justice and truth telling? How do we tell our truth and still be in a good way with those who have harmed us? How do we hold ourselves accountable to the values of the circle when we are not “in circle”? Too often the “fight” for social justice asks that we adopt the same hurtful techniques of aggression, manipulation, stereotyping, and righteous indignation that have caused us harm.

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. Circles help us, as Gandhi says, “be the change we want to see in the world.”



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1 See also the article in *New Designs for Youth Development*, Vol. 15, No. 2, entitled “Roca: A Multicultural Way of Life” (Spring 1999, pp. 13–18).

2 Liz Shear’s article “Learning Large: Reclaiming the Sacred in Youth Work,” *CYD Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 24–29, is an excellent source for more about the Medicine Wheel and its application in Community Youth Development.

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