

AN INTRODUCTION TO CIRCLEWORK™

by Jalaja Bonheim, Ph.D.

Today, thousands of groups all around the country are choosing to meet in circles. This is new-just a few decades ago, you would have found the same groups sitting in a classroom format. Intuitively, people sense that the circle has something to offer them. People often comment that the circle helps them feel a sense of community, and that it reminds them of the value of equality-in the circle, nobody occupies a "special" position.

However, most groups that gather in a circle are not practicing Circlework™. While Circlework™ may include a wide range of elements such as emotional healing work, discussion, physical exercise, and so on, it is first and foremost a spiritual practice that begins and ends with awareness of the center. This awareness of, and reverence for, the center as a place of sacred power is what distinguishes Circlework™ from other types of circle gatherings.

Circlework™ begins and ends with the intention of listening to the voice of the center, the voice of spirit-or, if you prefer, to the voice of our own deepest wisdom, of which the center is the universal symbol. Circlework™ deepens our receptivity and strengthens our connection to spirit. Like a giant ear, or like a satellite dish, the circle helps us tune in to vast resources of healing, wisdom and guidance. Many people have found Circlework™ to be a powerful agent of individual healing, transformation, and growth.

My own background is in dance, psychotherapy, Hindu mythology and Buddhist meditation. Therefore, movement and dance are important elements of my circles, as are meditation, chanting, ritual, storytelling, and emotional healing. I personally feel primarily called to lead women's circles, and to train women in circle leadership. However, Circlework™ can take myriad forms. Today, circles are forming in schools and hospitals, in businesses and in the corporate world. Young and old, men and women are beginning to reclaim the circle as a tool for healing themselves, their families and communities.

Circlework™, as we practice it today, is both ancient and brand new. It's ancient in that humans have always gathered in circles to pray, celebrate, and seek spiritual communion. Throughout the ages, around the planet, the center of a circle has been revered as symbol of the universal source. At the same time, Circlework™ is new, because we know, in a way our ancestors did not, that we live on a small planet where all beings are interconnected. We know that we cannot survive unless we evolve into planetary citizens and agents of world peace. In addition, the increasing complexity of the human psyche demands that we apply all the insights and skills of modern psychology to the art of Circlework™. In Circlework™, we develop psychological and spiritual maturity simultaneously.

In the twentieth century, the great psychologist C.G. Jung was the first to acknowledge the power of the circle as an archetype of wholeness and integration. As he pointed out, the center of a circle is an ancient and universally understood symbol of God, Spirit, the

Source, the One. He described the circle archetype as a much-needed medicine for the modern illness of psychological and social disintegration. Jung himself painted circular images called mandalas, and used mandala art in his work with patients. Circlework™ builds on Jung's insights, but takes them one step further by reclaiming the circle as a vessel for groups to experience healing and wholeness, not just individuals.

Each human being is both a unique, separate individual and a social creature. Therefore, we need both solitary and communal forms of spiritual practice. Because our society has for the last few centuries worshipped at the altar of individualism, we have gathered a great wealth of spiritual practices that can be done without a community. Meditation, prayer, visualization, and yoga are just a few examples.

However, we're impoverished in the arena of communal practice. Most communal forms of spiritual practice reflect specific religious doctrines. Thus, Catholics participate in the Mass, and Moslems in communal prayer. While these are rich, beautiful practices, they don't support spiritual communion between people of diverse religious faiths. Moreover, growing numbers of people no longer feel aligned with institutional religion. More and more people feel spiritually alone and disconnected. They yearn for spiritual community, but all too often don't know where to find it, or how to create it.

Circlework™ is a spiritual rather than a religious practice, and is not based on any particular creed. Therefore, it has the power to unite people who hold widely divergent religious and spiritual beliefs, or who have no particular beliefs at all. The only prerequisite for Circlework™ - the foundation that all members of a circle must share - is respect for life in all its forms, and a commitment to individual, social, and planetary wholeness.

Circlework™ represents a powerful tool for planetary as well as personal healing. As a form of relationship practice, it teaches us the ways of peaceful co-existence, skillful communication, and compassionate love of self and others. At the same time, Circlework™ hones our receptivity to spirit-something we urgently need to cultivate at this time in history. Our brains, miraculous though they are, are incapable of meeting the challenges we now face. If we continue to rely on them alone for guidance, we will no doubt go the way of the dinosaurs, taking thousands of other species with us. Circlework™ offers a non-religious way for people to gather in sacred space, and to access vast resources of creativity and compassion-resources that can help accomplish what none of our politicians have been able to do, namely to secure a livable planet for our children and our children's children.

© Copyright 2007 by Jalaja Bonheim