

INTERVIEW WITH JALAJA BONHEIM, Ph.D.
By Amina Kosztyo and Rachel McGuire
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Q: What was the motivation behind the formation of the Institute for Circlework™, and what vision does it hold?

J: The Institute for Circlework™ is a community of circle lovers and Circlework™ leaders who want to mutually support one another, share information, and help one another grow. We share a vision of circle gatherings becoming available to everyone, no matter where they live. We would like everyone to have that opportunity, and we are interested in developing partnerships with other like-minded organizations. One of our most important goals is to train skilled Circlework leaders. Currently, the Institute not only organizes the Circlework™ Training, but has over the past two years also given \$20,000 in scholarships for trainees. A circle of people may look like a very simple thing, but we're dealing with the human psyche, which is very complex. In the long run, to skillfully lead a circle takes a lot of training. Right now, I don't see many places where people can receive that kind of training. We're also looking at training trainers. For example, one woman in the current training is working with youth. Rather than leading circles for youth, she wants to empower young people by training them to lead their own circles.

Q: You yourself have been leading and teaching circles in an ever-widening way. How did this journey begin?

J: People ask me where my work originated. I don't know; it just popped out of me. Leading circles felt like a calling. The first time I consciously recognized the power of the circle was in a women's weekend to which a friend had invited me. At the end of the weekend we were each asked to say what had particularly touched or moved us. I realized that what had most moved me was quite simply the experience of women sitting together in a circle. I suddenly got this hit of something very potent and ancient. I remember thinking, "Hmm... There's something about the circle."

Q: Can you say more about what this "hit" was?

J: I believe that our species has gathered in circles since its beginnings. We're talking not just about thousands, but tens of thousands of years, which means that we have thousands of generations of ancestral experience with circles. So it makes sense that the experience of the circle has dropped into the very depths of our psyche. You could call it instinctual, or you could describe it as an aspect of the collective unconscious. In any case, it's a very deep knowing in the psyche which can remain latent in our psyche for a long time. For me, it was latent until that moment I described. When C.G. Jung talked about the awakening of an archetype, that's what he was referring to. Of course, Jung himself was fully aware of the power of the circle, which he called the archetype of wholeness, and of God. That's what I meant when I talked about a "hit." Modern industrial society is, I believe, the very first where people don't regularly gather in

circles. Even today, if you go to more traditional cultures, you'll see people performing circle dances and circle rituals. We are the first ones who have forgotten that.

Q: What do you think the consequences of that are?

J: The consequences are enormous. It creates a profound sense of isolation and disconnection. The circle offers us a very special experience of connection with our own species, with the planet, and with all other beings on the planet. We're missing that. Also, the circle doesn't just symbolize wholeness; it generates wholeness. It's a tremendous source of healing. We've temporarily forgotten it, but it's waiting for us to remember. Over and over, my experience in the circle confirms that. People say, "Oh, I feel like I'm coming home." Or: "I feel like I'm just remembering something that I already know." Or they tell me they're having images and dreams and visions of ancestral circles.

Q. In my experience, Circlework™ is absolutely unique. Could you talk about what sets it apart from other forms of groupwork?

J: Circlework™ addresses three basic human needs: first, the need to become a whole, fully actualized person, second, the need to build community and contribute to society, and finally, the need to cultivate a direct, very personal, and very intimate relationship with Spirit-or, if you prefer, with one's own inner guidance. This is something many people yearn for, but don't know how to find. Circlework™ has a way of helping people access their own authority in personal as well as spiritual matters. In Circlework™, the leader does not present themselves as an authority who has the answers. They don't come in and say, "I know how you should live, and now I'm going to tell you." This would run against the very essence of the circle. We assume that each person has an inner wisdom, and that we are all teachers for one another. We often view personal growth and social transformation as separate issues. We think, "Well, personal growth is just a luxury. It doesn't have much to do with the global situation." That is a misconception. Our efforts to heal society will not be successful if we ignore our own need for healing. Our spirituality will stagnate if we don't address our personal issues. Social activists burn out when they don't have places where they receive nurturance for their hearts and souls. And unless we learn to still our minds and access the deeper wisdom within, we will not be able to respond skillfully and effectively to the challenges we face in our daily lives. In short, we need to recognize the interconnection of personal, collective and spiritual work. Circlework™ addresses our urgent need for a new kind of spiritual community, one that reflects our emerging planetary awareness. It doesn't require us to adopt any particular set of beliefs. We could be Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or nothing at all. This is not true of most other spiritual practices. They might be very beautiful, but because they have generally grown out of a particular religious tradition or a belief system, they tend to lack the universality and the inclusiveness of Circlework™. Religion can be divisive, even though it isn't meant to be. Just think about how many wars are being fought in the name of religion. In contrast, people often describe Circlework™ as the most inclusive spiritual practice they have ever experienced. Circlework™ honors our diversity, but it also allows us to experience our common

humanity.

Q: What strikes me is that while the circle is open to all people, specific circles can be very selective and very unique. Circlework™ isn't a generic experience. The women you have trained are leading circles in very particular ways for particular communities.

J: That's absolutely right. Circlework™ is extremely versatile; it can be used in many different environments, such as hospitals, churches, or corporations. Graduates of the Circlework™ training share a foundation in the theoretical and practical teachings that the training provides, as well as a sense of reverence and respect for the people they serve. Beyond that, there's an enormous range. I try to help each person develop their own unique expression of Circlework™.

Q: In view of where we are today in our world, and our society, what keeps you keeping on?

J: I guess I'm just a bit insane, that's all... (laughter). A form of madness, perhaps? But truly, if I didn't have the experience of being in circle, I would be in profound despair. I think I would feel quite hopeless about the journey of our species. Every time I come to the circle, I have this extraordinary experience of the beauty that lies within all of us. Within very ordinary people... You see them opening up, and you see their wisdom and beauty and their unbelievable capacity for love. It becomes so obvious that we all share the same yearning for peace and understanding. That truth is easy to lose sight of when you read the newspapers or watch television.

Q: So your involvement with circles really gives you hope.

J: Yes. That's what keeps me going on a personal level. On a more collective level, I feel strongly that here we have a quite simple yet very potent tool that can be used anywhere, by anyone on the planet, under pretty much any circumstance. You don't need fancy technology; you don't need anything at all besides the intention to gather in circle and call in the spirit of peace and compassion. What an amazing gift! I want to say to people, "Hey, look at what we've got here! Let's use it to heal ourselves and our communities."

Q: Could you say a little more about the issue of despair? Why is it so important that we deal with our despair?

J: When we are alone and isolated, despair can immobilize and disempower us. We feel, "I don't even want to look at the issue; it's too devastating; it's too painful." That's where a lot of us are today. The state of the world feels so overwhelming, the problems seem so huge, and we feel so tiny and impotent that we often just try to ignore our despair. We may fear that we would lose our ability to function if we really allowed ourselves to feel the depths of our grief. The circle offers us a container that can hold all that grief, anger and fear, and guide us through that ocean of emotional energy. And on

the other side we find a recognition of the power that we do have. Because we do! But to get there, we must first be willing to open to what lies within us. We need to have a safe space to feel and express our emotions. We can't just push them aside.

Circlework™ opens the doors for people to claim the power to effect change and transformation that they really do have, but can't access by themselves.

Q: My experience of the circle is also that it strengthens our voice and gives us courage.

J: Authentic self-expression is contagious. We all want it so much, that's what we were born for, but we're scared. Fear is so pervasive in our society, so crippling, and fear thrives on isolation. The circle creates connections that literally en-courage us, that fill us with courage. It's so inspiring when someone steps forward and claims their authentic voice. You can't help but think, "Oh, she did it! Maybe I can, too..."

Q: You mentioned that you see Circlework™ as a peacemaking tool. Of course peace is of great concern to everyone right now. Could you elaborate on that?

J: The circle provides a structure that can include national, ethnic, racial and religious diversity while ensuring that everyone has a voice, and is respectfully heard. What happens quite naturally in the process is that our hearts open to one another, and that prejudices and preconceptions melt away. We come to understand in a way that is not just cerebral but cellular, how our common humanity and by our mutual desire for happiness connects us with people whom we might otherwise ignore, judge, or reject. In the past, making peace was one option, and waging war was another. Today, our destructive potential is so immense that the choice to wage war has become a choice to self-destruct. More and more people are beginning to realize the ultimately suicidal nature of war. If we want to survive, the study of how to get along must become a priority. What would it take for people to co-exist peacefully? That is the most urgent question we face. Circlework™ very quickly teaches us lessons about inner and outer peace. You could describe it as a classroom, even a crash course, because it is so intense, so demanding. I think that is why the Jewish and the Palestinian women I've recently been working with intuitively chose the form of the circle for their peacework in Israel. They recognized the circle as a container that could bring them together and hold them.

Q: To me, Circlework™ has been such a source of joy and celebration. Could you say something about that? This world needs joy so badly.

J: Yes it does. There is such a sense of delight that arises from the experience of our unity and our connection. You can see decades of tension and fear and loneliness dropping from people's faces. I've seen people look 20 years younger after a circle. We have so few opportunities in this culture to experience deep intimacy outside of our marriages or love affairs. When do we ever get intimate with a group of people? And yet, it's part of our need as human beings. When it happens, it brings us incredible joy. Joy is not just an incidental side-effect of Circlework™. Both joy and beauty are core values of Circlework™. They aren't mere luxuries; the human soul needs them in order

to thrive.

Q: You are the author of four books, the most recent one being *The Hunger for Ecstasy*. Can you speak a little bit about its theme?

J: Its premise is that every human being is hungry for ecstasy, and that if we do not address this hunger, it will manifest in negative ways such as drug or alcohol addiction. The true source of ecstasy is spiritual, not material. Many people have forgotten that; they're looking for ecstasy in a new car or a perfect marriage. We often say that God is love. The Hindu tradition goes further to say that God is ecstasy. So, if we want to have more ecstasy in our lives, we must look at our spirituality and ask ourselves: "Is my spirituality really supporting ecstasy? Is it nourishing my joy, or is it in some way repressing it?"

Q: That's beautiful. Thank you.

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