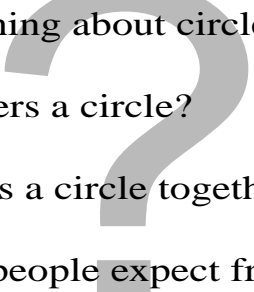


Celebrating Circles of Support
March 18, 2000
Dumas Center, Federal Way Washington

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- One true thing about circles is ...?
 - What gathers a circle?
 - What keeps a circle together?
 - What can people expect from a circle?

Meeting facilitated and recorded by John O'Brien and Connie Lyle O'Brien

On Saturday, March 18, about forty people involved with Circle Way, met to celebrate, think together about circles of support and share their experiences of being a member of a circle. Participants included people with disabilities around whom circles have been formed, parents, circle members, interested citizens. The following provides a visual image of the discussion accompanied by a more detailed account of what people shared.

A circle is in touch with deep beauty. People get in touch with something inside themselves that is very deep and very meaningful.

A circle is about relationships.

A circle is being neighbors and friends, our neighborhood.

Having a circle is a way of being inclusive and respectful of all.

It's about true friends, people who care.

A circle is natural.

A circle is comforting and encouraging and helps to formalize friendship.

Circles are about reciprocity.

A circle takes time that people don't mind giving because it's well spent and something happens when you're together

A circle provides ongoing support to the person and the family.

There is no cookbook for a circle, no one right way.

Each circle has its own rhythm, ebb and flow.

A circle is for my friends.

A circle is about building community intentionally.

One true thing about circles is ... ?

A circle is more than any of its pieces.

A circle is about becoming and changing.

A circle opens different ways of LOOKING, plus support.

A circle is about what you CAN do instead of what you can't do.

In a circle, relationships develop that are unexpected and wonderful.

A circle gives us courage.

A circle is about creating a better community.

Everybody needs one whether it is formal or informal.

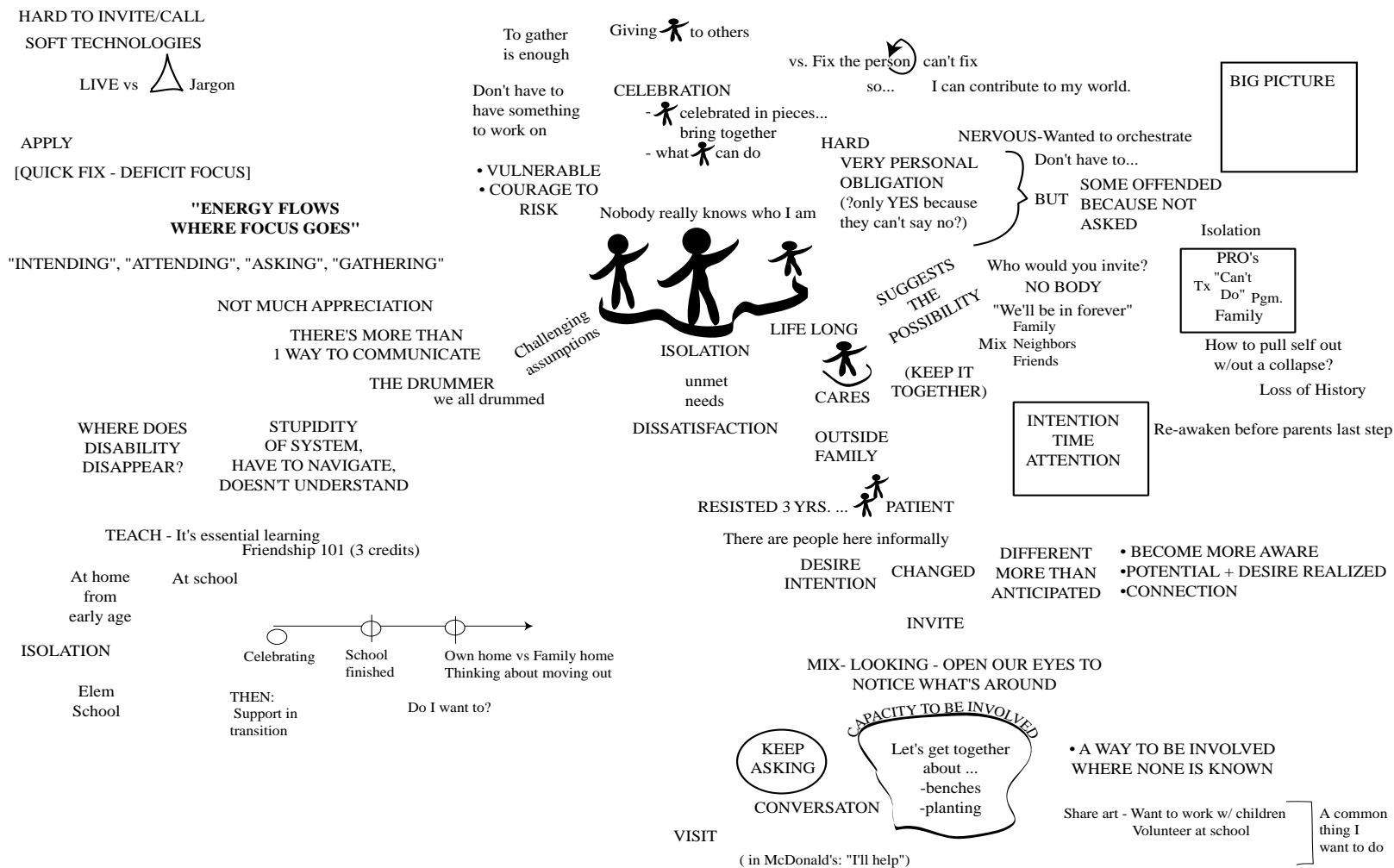
A circle has multiplicity and creativity, not like the linear approach of bureaucracies.

In a circle, each person is unique.

A circle represents how life is supposed to be.

My circle is where I'm accepted for who I am.

My circle offers a strong belief that my quality of life will improve.



Sometimes it's important to gather a circle when something is changing in someone's life. Moving out, graduation from high school. Sometimes there is a sense of unmet need. Sometimes there is a dissatisfaction with what is officially available. A counterflow... not only unmet need and satisfaction, a sense of giving the person to others — I can help the neighbor, we think that someone in our life has important things to give to other people. Sometimes it's a matter of noticing who already celebrates parts of the person, what would emerge if we brought all those people together. But taking the step is a step into vulnerability and risk. It takes courage and encouragement. It's clear that for some of us, there are lots of informal connections anyway. Sometimes the step is going from informal to purposefully bringing people together. Things change once the desire to bring people together grows strong enough to do it. Having a third party is often important. There's a lot more potential in people than we have ways to make known. Some of us, who are moving out from ourselves or someone we love, face this wall we have to push through about fears of asking. On the other side, we find people who want to be invited. There's some amount of capacity out there that is not touched in lots of us.

What is it that gathers a circle?

Unmet needs for individuals

Dissatisfaction

Very hard initially to talk to people about it. It's very personal. We were afraid people would say yes just because they didn't want to say no to us. But when we actually started, the people we didn't ask were offended because we did not ask them.

Someone, other than the parents, cares enough about the person, thinks the person is worthwhile, simply cares, is really helpful.

I resisted for three years calling an intentional circle. People were very understanding and patient. I didn't think it was necessary to formalize it. At the end of the third year the desire was so strong that I had to do it. People began to come into our lives just because the focus was there.

Starts sometimes because of the stupidity of the system that families have to navigate. Systems don't understand who their child is.

I had to be vulnerable enough to welcome it and take risk and have the courage to try something new.

Sherie was soon to be getting out of school and recognizing that she would be living at home forever without interaction. She needed others.

I'm thinking about moving out on my own in July.

A sense of separation. People celebrated parts of my daughter not all of her. Giving my daughter to others.

We live in a neighborhood where people care about each other. The next step was being more intentional. Matthew was looking for some more activi-

ties. A neighbor had a new dog that needed walking. When I noticed the dog but didn't know how to make it happen, I shared my concern with another neighbor who came up with the same idea. That neighbor called the other neighbor. Now he has a whole new relationship with someone that was already there.

How hard it is for parents and the person to call people to invite to their circle.

We were working with a family and explaining circles. Family said no way. But after a while they brought together a wonderful and diverse group of people. After the plan, family did not want to continue circle. A neighbor who was involved said, "I want to be in his life now. I don't want to wait until there is a crisis."

A life long intention on our part for Kyle. We got a facilitator who for us was the link that would keep that circle together and maintain it for his entire life.

I am amazed at the capacity of mankind for goodness. I am intrigued about getting people in who don't have any connection to the person... planting trees, cleaning up the park.

Seizing the moment.

Our original circle meetings were about celebrating. The celebrations gave people the chance to get to know Kyle better. People got to know him when he was not in a crisis.

All my friends were my original circle to help me get my own place and a job.

"Energy flows where focus goes." When the invitation starts to go, energy flows. As soon as the intention was put out there, Diane came into our lives. Creative focus and desire made me become aware.

Taking a small piece to focus on and taking some steps to get there.

It's a different way of thinking. We opened up our eyes to notice what was around. A frame of mind, always looking for opportunities..

Being a teacher, I've used circles for transition. Lots of the students only have me and the family. But I can't teach if I try to be in the circles of all my students. How can I participate and then withdraw without the circle collapsing?

"Attention" and "intention": Called "attention" by doing some future's planning. He likes to drum. Hooked up with a drum teacher who then came to the next circle meeting. The drum teacher said this guy was a great drummer and that probably one day he would be able to teach others. He said he got paid for doing the lessons, but he would have done it anyway. Calling attention to the giftedness in people. And we all drummed and made music together. During the drumming, there was no disability.

Important in circles that we celebrate what the person can do. So many professionals are only looking to "fix" or "therapize" the person. It's OK to be who you are. It doesn't always have to be about fixing but also about accepting. When people are always trying to fix me, I think I'm not OK as I am. Or you're being uncooperative because you won't be fixed.

Can be confusing sometimes. You don't have to have a particular goal to gather friends together. You can do it just for the being together.

To gather a circle, you have to require it. We need to teach children the importance both at home and at school. Building friendships is not necessarily innate, so you just have to teach it.

The kids in Kyle's circle wanted to talk to me about what was happening at school. Has it now in his IEP time to spend with his friends. The kids came to the IEP and gave wonderful recommendations to the teachers about how to adapt things for Kyle.

Too many things are deficit oriented. Identify problem, solve it, send them back.

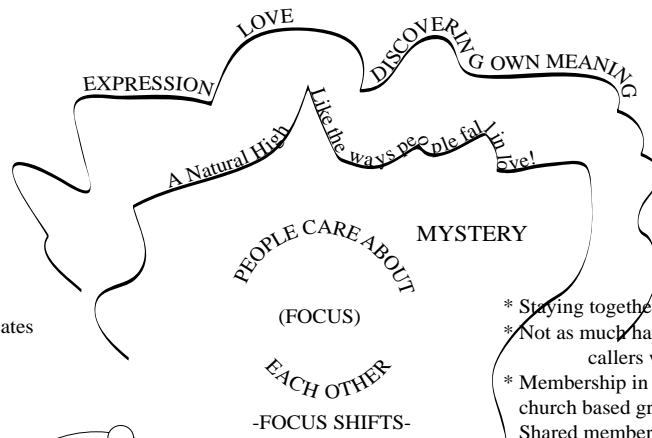
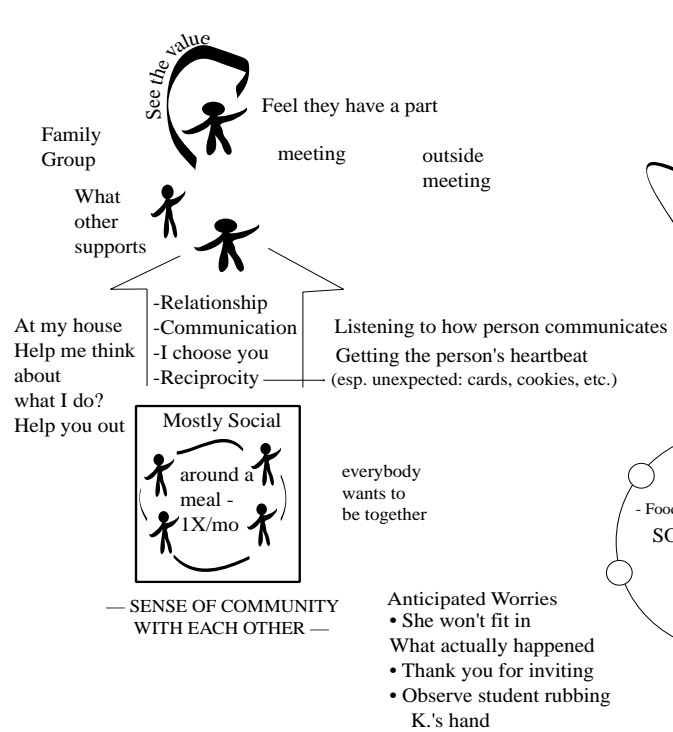
Jargon free. Has to do with life, not systems.

Sometimes we have to focus on what the person wants, not what the parents want for the person. Celebrate the child.

I was more of an observer than a participant when the circle first started. I was so nervous and wanted everything to go right. As time went on, I realized I didn't have to orchestrate everything, but I could participate.

Older parents and their children are isolated and that gets worse every year. Circles are a way to reawaken something in their lives. We bring families together so there is more than one family.

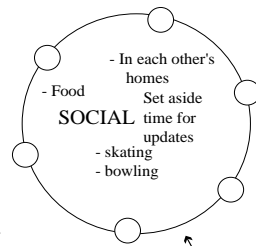
Some people look at a person with a disability and say there's no one there. But if you are looking and looking over time, then these possibilities show up that have been there all along but no one noticed. You have to hold the purpose through time. Part of the process of gathering, considering the possibility of asking, considering being intimidated by that, living with that fear for however long it needs to be there, noticing that it's important to be intentional about it anyway. That sometimes results in people coming together in a way that encourages us to discover capacities and desires to connect that are not just in the person with a disability but are in the world out there. We can start to look for situations in which disability disappears. What could we do together or how could we be together in such a way that our assumptions get scrambled? If we create a situation around the person's gift, we have to notice the absence of this gift in ourselves. Once people have an opportunity to be together, some things begin to emerge. Some people have only experienced being worked on. You don't have to worry about the balance of celebration, crisis and difficulty because life just brings all that along. We can remember a moment when we wanted to invite and were stuck about doing that. There is another possibility, if it's true that the energy flows where the focus goes. Some people are surrounded by people who focus on what the person can't do. Then all the attention is going in and you're not likely to notice things in the outside world that could be a resource.



* checking things out with others

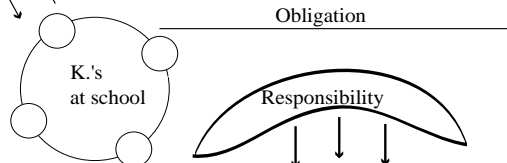


- If I stop...
 - often the circle ends
 - it's discouragin
- ?? Self-facilitating...
 - Expertise vs. Membership
 - convening
- How can we pass on the role??



- What we have in common is:
1. interest in the person
 2. interest in each other

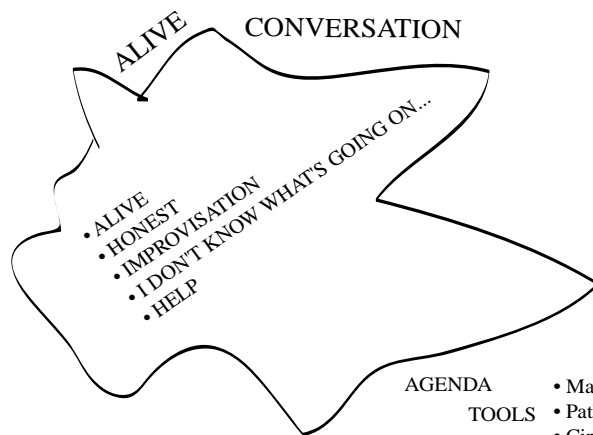
• Some people's interest goes up and down. People are not necessarily consistent.



START AS SOON AS YOU CAN!!!

WE NEEDED IT WHEN WE WERE 6 YRS. OLD

- Kids have friendships; go to movies, phone, stay overnight
- Social element is missing (partly because of prejudice, lack of transportation, lack of experience)



LIFE IS AN ONGOING PROCESS

KEEP
VISION//DREAM
ALIVE & GROWING

ORGANIC \PROCESS VS.

What keeps a circle going?

People have to feel they have a purpose and are making a difference.

Everybody wants to come. We get together once a month to share a meal. You can tell people really want to get together. Everybody feels like the circle is for all of them. It's not just centered on the person for whom the circle was formed. There is a sense of satisfaction for each person.

Our circle meetings are mostly social but we set aside a time to work on anything that needs to be done. Everybody was previously part of our life, as we formalized it, we've done things like renting a skating rink, gone bowling, rented a DJ. It's a social gathering of friends and what we have in common is our interest in Kyle. It kind of feels like a family reunion. People care about what's happening in everybody's life. When Kyle went to middle school, there was a big concern because it was so different. They knew him before there was a problem.

From my own experience, I needed it when I was six years old. Most people have friends all throughout their life that they go to movies with or sit and giggle with over the phone. My experience, and that of others I've interacted with, is that the social element of our lives is missing. Education about social things can never begin too soon. How would you feel if you were always excluded?

Sometimes I think it's a mystery why people come together regularly. Family says maybe we should stop because nothing is happening. But circle members say no, we like to keep coming together.

Maybe part of the issue with circles deals with "community." Also, maybe reciprocity plays a big

role. An expectation of contribution. How do you give back to your neighbors? When Matthew reaches out with a gesture of contribution, it engages contribution. We practice on writing notes to people, sending cards. That satisfies reciprocity.

Kyle. You're always wondering if your child is going to fit in. Want to thank people for inviting Kyle to a party. Parents who say that their unlabelled child is better for having known my child with a disability.

Keeping the conversation alive. The sense that every time you come together the aliveness, the excitement, the newness there. It's not the same old thing. As a facilitator, it's sort of a sense of vulnerability. Stepping out of that role that you don't know everything.

William Issacs, Facilitating dialogue.

Before facilitator leaves, try to negotiate another person taking over.

We're bringing two families together to see if they will continue their circles when the original facilitator goes on to the next circle.

For people like Sherie who don't speak, we have to figure out how to understand what the person is trying to communicate.

My circle meets at my house every other month. A couple of my friends help me out. Let's think about that. My friend says you can move closer to me and she'll come over and check on me.

The tools of the circle, PATH, and MAPS have all been important in helping us get through. We're using the PATH to help Abby get to her dream. It's an ongoing process because life is an ongoing process.

To keep the dreaming and visioning alive and growing. What keeps me alive and growing is looking at this whole thing as an organic process instead of an end product.

Check in with other facilitators and have other people involved. Understand where you are with the group. Build on the co-facilitation process as you use it in MAPS and PATH.

It can be a good starting point for a circle, if someone has a problem. But it's also possible to get together out of a celebration of the person. You don't always have to have a particular goal. People are still spending time with each other even when there is no particular thing to work on. Marge says maybe we've lost some people because they haven't understood what their role was in the circle. Maybe they didn't have enough of a personal relationship with Sherie to value just being there. Gathering people together when Kyle was younger as family to family started before issues were there. Out of that comes a group of people who can take a particular focus if it needs to be there. At each circle you take time to see if there is anything that needs to be done. Kids emerged when Kyle went to middle school. There is a support system for Kyle at school and a support for parents at home.

There are critical things in staying together. Respecting people's freedom to come and go. There are a number of ways to contain people's relationship with each other. We want as many opportunities as possible to get the person's "heartbeat." If you don't have a sense of the heartbeat, it's hard to stay together.

Sherie can testify to the fact that children with obvious disabilities face isolation, discrimination. That's a pretty good guide to the fact that it's never too soon to start working on the social issues. Exposure is one issue, but another is an issue of responsibility. What responsibilities do we have for each other?

It's important for people to have the experience of being chosen. When the people with disabilities need support in order to be reciprocal, we need to figure out a way to raise the responsibility to assist with reciprocity. Another dimension is getting more people involved and maybe having more than one circle. Another dimension is that some of us are living with circles where we share something in common other than just the person, like a religious base, a neighborhood. Sometimes it's just sort of a mystery. (Maybe like falling in love.) Sometimes they continue because circles are a high, a natural rush. The other thing that's important is there is work to do with just keeping people connected, like establishing connections between other members of the circle.

We know that some situations sustain themselves because the people who animated the circle are in charge of it. It's different when an outsider takes the stance that I start the circle, then move on. Think more carefully about passing the job on to someone else. We described this as natural and tapping into an ordinary process, but it still needs tending. Facts at the moment are: we can't say as clearly to people as we would like, invest in circles for a while, train some facilitators, send them out to start up some and then move on to the next group. We don't have a reliable way to do it yet. Abby is doing a lot of the work of pulling her own circle together.

There's a part of the world that wants this to be a nice, neat thing. Then there are sort of these explosions. Then some things are mysterious, a natural high. The thing that seems to bring people closest together is not the order, but when "life breaks out." In the background for some of us, is trying to understand what community is about, what family is about, what does it mean to love each other, and recognizing how much we need each other. We need time and processes to enact that need for each other. The form and context is varied, but what we have to celebrate is an understanding of a non-linear approach that gives us the opportunity to understand how each of us is gifted. Also, to celebrate the courage that is necessary in the face of rejection. Our efforts are small, and it takes a lot to keep it going.