

## Reflections on Circles From

### **A Day for Circle Facilitators**

27 February 2003

### **A Retreat for Families & Circle Members**

28 February - 1 March 2003

John O'Brien and Peter Dill gathered to reflect with a group of circle facilitators and a group of family members and circle members. These notes are drawn from the wall charts made during the meetings. They are intended as a memory aid to those who participated.

# Reflections on Facilitating Circles

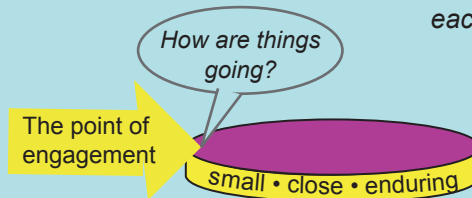
Peter Dill

27 February 2003

...each person, big or small, has a role to play in the world, As we start to really get to know others, as we begin to listen to each others stories, things begin to change. We no longer judge each other according to concepts of power and knowledge or according to group identity, but according to these personal, heart-to-heart encounters. We begin the movement from exclusion to inclusion, from fear to trust, from closedness to openness, from judgment and prejudice to forgiveness and understanding. It is a movement of the heart. We begin to see each others as brothers and sisters in humanity. We are no longer governed by fear, but by the heart.

—Jean Vanier

Nothing can happen until someone invites us into their lives. Accepting the invitation makes that person part of my own unfolding story.



Stories unfold in telling, hearing, & re-telling.

## Engage deeply where people are, not bringing solutions but listening & accompanying as people's stories unfold

shared journey

We are doing the work of our own humanity. If we are not born to the responsibility of this work, we cannot be trained to do it.

For all of its members, the circle raises these questions:  
*Who are we to one another?*  
*How can we be helpful to one another?*

mutuality

Deeply listening to the story leads to mutual actions, which bring the hope necessary for re-telling & acting again.

deep listening

A circle is a contrivance. It is constructed intentionally for the purpose of finding & strengthening friendship.

- A circle is **not** a place to fix people... though healing can occur
- A circle is **not** a means to achieve outcomes... though hopeful things do happen
- A circle is **not** a place to solve problems... though problems are addressed
- A circle is **not** a guarantee of life long safety... though security can increase



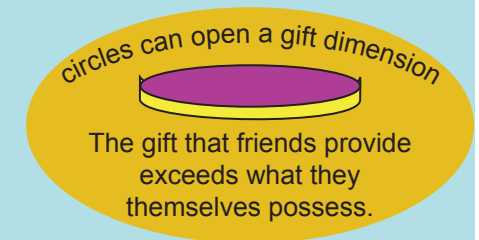
### Ubuntu

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu  
*A person is a person through other persons*  
or  
*I am what I am because of you*  
[www.ivow.net/ubuntu.html](http://www.ivow.net/ubuntu.html)

*In each of my friends, there is something that only another friend can bring out*  
—C.S. Lewis

*Why do we enter into fellowship with one another? In no other way can we be ourselves.*  
—John Macmurray

[johnmacmurray.gn.apc.org/Discovering%20Macmurray.htm](http://johnmacmurray.gn.apc.org/Discovering%20Macmurray.htm)



circles can open a gift dimension  
The gift that friends provide exceeds what they themselves possess.



People experienced in services often think "a circle is just another kind of meeting". So its important to find ways that people can make the time & space their own. Attention to good welcomes, eating together, times to enjoy being with each other in different ways & places, & good leavings give everyone a sense of being valued for who they, themselves, are.

We can learn to listen for more than particular interests that lead us to activities (e.g. a person's expressed interest in trains leads us to share a train ride). We can listen beyond this level to search for the question that constantly drives this person on in life. Waiting to see I friend I grew fascinated with a revolving door which disappeared if approached at just the right angle and speed - a person moving in the right way did not have to slow down at all. My fascination is not a sign that I want to spend time watching doors, it is a sign of the question that drives my life: "How can I make disability disappear?"

# on listening deeply

As a circle develops more & more members experience a kind of transformation, finding that "I can because I belong to all of you."

People with disabilities keep teaching me to listen is a deepened way & not to worry so much about what i look like to others

Suffering is always good for penetrating our cranial cement..

Fix "them" Be with one another & act on what we hear in each other's stories  
It's the clash between these ways that brings us together

Stuck? Invite some new people in. Stale? Invite some new people in. Some will stay, some won't.

It can take people a long time to decide to invite a circle. The more trust we build by respecting & supporting this deciding time, the more sustainable the circle is likely to be.

Circles that form in crisis have a pull toward fixing. To sustain themselves, these circles have to allow time to be with each other & practice listening.

If we are balanced & quiet instead of busy thinking of solutions or busy being worried about not having solutions, we create a sort of a bowl into which people's knowledge flows like water. Then we can turn & look in the water together to see what 's next.

I have discovered that I have a kind of engineering idea of what is logical and reasonable that acted as a sort of un-noticed filter & limited my listening. People's stories & dreams don't fit through this filter. I can be more with people when I set my version of logic out of the way.

- Service organizations that offer circle facilitation as a service have to balance...
- pressure to meet external time limits against the time relationships take to grow
  - pressure for measurable outcomes against the emergence of hopeful positive action from sustained listening
  - pressure to provide an expert professional answer against the circle as creation of those who invite others into their lives
  - pressure for staff to "get in, get the circle started, & get out" against the fact that circles are about personal engagement & membership for everyone present

It is passion that motivates & sustains our work. Hierarchies can not renew & sustain passion so we are responsible for finding the energy we need in relationships.

Recognition that each of us is broken -in part by a culture that encourages separation & pushes vulnerable people away- leads to deeper commitment to each other.

- These actions facilitate circles, no matter who does them\*...**
- ...inviting & supporting the person who centers the circle to invite others into the circle
  - ...deep listening
  - ...identifying with each member & especially with the person who centers the circle
  - ...sharing stories
  - ...asking
  - ...pinpointing do-able actions that generate hope
- \*good facilitators model these actions & encourage members to share responsibility for them rather than counting on the named facilitator

*Intentional is not the same as formal or official*

*Inviting can be the most frightening thing, but we've found people who are ready to come forward & glad to be asked to play a role.*

*Courage is essential*

*Circles create their own ways of being together: rituals & customs that reflect their identity as a circle*

**Intentionally coming together & staying together**

*sit with... listen deeply to... identify with...*

*A circle is not "the final answer." Uncertainty about the long term future continues*

*Circles align with the person who centers them. A person on the move needs a circle that can listen & respond to motion .*

*Some people get stuck because they think of a circle as it it were intruding on their privacy. Its more accurate to see it as extending your friendships.*

*Circles may come together around crisis. They stay together because of the relationships built by being together & listening.*

*Circles endure the losses of people leaving & the disappointments of people not fulfilling agreements*

*do with... be with... stand up for ...*

*Imagine what could happen if parents were informed & supported to create circles from birth.*

**Revealing & exchanging gifts**

### What we value in our circles

**Continuity:** assuring that those committed to the person who center the circle are joined by others so that if people's changing lives move them away, the circle maintains itself as a present resource

**Focus:** being guided by listening deeply to the unfolding story of our life together, holding the life of the person who centers the circle at the heart of our concern

**Mutuality:** living our interdependence in a way that allows the exchange of our gifts

**Fidelity: accompanying** each other through the ups and downs of life in a way that calls on each of us to be our best

**Sustainability:** taking actions now that will insure that the circle will renew itself through time, for as long as the person who centers it lives

### Some of the Contributions Circle Members Make

- Companions
- Intentional thinkers about what makes life good & how to deal with hard times
- Supporters in crisis
- Knowers of a person from a new point of view
- Inviters of others into the person's life
- Celebrants of occasions, milestones, & identities
- Holders of a part of the person's story
- Voices for other possibilities & ways of thinking
- Links to new opportunities; door openers
- Assistants in decision making
- Helpers with the tasks of managing assistants & money
- Allies in advocacy
- Planners with people at transition times
- Creative problem solvers

I'm imposing on people by asking them to join the circle.

No one will respond

People will resent me for trying to shift my work to them. I'll lose my friends..

People's values will be bad. They'll think she "belongs with her own kind" & make suggestions that will infuriate me.

No body can do it like me.

The circle will take over

Things are too private, too personal for others to know about

Asking for help means admitting that I am a failure as a parent.

People who have not lived what I have lived could never understand.

Some of the "voices in our heads" that we have to deal with in deciding to invite a circle into our lives

*It's the way we are together that attracts & keeps people. Circles are about life.*

*Many people are hungry for a change to be in relationship in ways that matter.*

*Many circles develop their own traditions for assuring that everyone feels welcome & acknowledged, for allowing people to share what happening in their lives & how they can help one another, for saying good-bye, for recording & communicating their news.*

*It's not just meetings. Many circle members spend time with the person who centers the circle. If communication is difficult aids like a scrapbook can help.*

*My son has never had a circle. He has been the beneficiary of the circle that has supported me to stand up for him over & over again.*

*We only ask people to gather once to think about the person's life. At the end of that meeting we planned the date for the next gathering & ask people to come back. Then we ask for the next, & the next. Listening & story telling leads to commitment & action.*

*When we find the courage to ask we have always been surprised at how many people will respond*

*I only had to find the courage to ask one person to do the asking for me.*

*I needed to spend time with a few people I really trust working through the decision to invite a*

*The person who centers the circle is the most powerful source of invitations.*

*Once people have spent some time with the person, and discovered how much she has to offer, they are eager to contribute.*

*It helps to have a clear idea of why you are inviting each person. Identify what gift you see in them, acknowledge their gift \* ask them to join in.*

*One person we thought was "too busy to be asked" was offended at being left out.*

## the wisdom of experience

*The point is not to "let go" or turn control over to others. The point is to make room to for relationships with others who can strengthen our whole ability to live good lives.*

*Attend to refreshing the circle. Bring people with different gifts into the circle. Reach outside for new ideas.*

*Have occasional celebrations that involve the biggest possible number of people connected to those*

*Work consciously to have a 3 or 4 generation circle: from parents or grandparents to age peers of the person who centers the circle to younger children*

*Invest greater trust in the circle as relationships develop.*

*Discover the contributions that each member can make & make room for them to contribute.*

*Empower the person who centers the circle to invite & welcome people into her or his life.*

*Take increasing responsibility & share facilitation tasks so the circle doesn't become too dependent on one facilitator..*

## Increasing sustainability

*Create networks of circles or family groups that include a number of circles who commit to journeying together.*

*Gather with other circles to share experiences, inquire about learning, & keep values clear & supple.*

*Encouraging mentoring, not to impose "one right way" but to help circles avoid or overcome common difficulties & get clear on basic values.*

*Grow Lifetime Circles as a support structure for circles.*

*Keep working for adequate individualized funding.*

*Build up an accessible knowledge base that documents what can be said about the different ways that circles develop.*

*There is lot of pain around circles for me. Somehow what happens doesn't match my expectation of how it is supposed to be.*

*Understands that relationships are fundamental*

*Doesn't jump to tasks. Holds open the time for listening*

*Helps us see what's out there.*

*Helps us think about things another way.*

*Philosophy vibrates in tune with family.*

## Facilitator Contributions

**Navigator**

**Motivator**

**Catalyst**

**Resource**

**Sounding Board**

*Stays clear on underlying values & brings us back to them again & again*

*Helps others come to the point of doing.*

*Enables the circle to gain strength by encouraging shared responsibility*

*Close people are "down in the bottom of the pot." Can't see important parts of the whole picture. The facilitator is "in the pot with us, but close enough to the top to be able to see over the edge and see all that's going on with us.*

*Respects each circle's development. No cookie cutter.*

*Can listen deeply & encapsulate the central idea*

*Attentive to gifts & the power of asking*

*Staff teams have their own issues. A circle that tries to double as a staff team can become the site of power struggles with staff. Agendas multiply. Listening can get lost..*