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# Circle Practice: Stories of Organizational Change, Relationships and Community

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CIRCLE PRACTICE: STORIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE,  
RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY

A Master's Project Presented

by

Colleen M. Twomey

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Science  
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### **Abstract**

This project explores the impacts of an organizational development process in a non-profit domestic and sexual violence program. The organizational changes documented in this initiative illuminate a disconnect between the process for organizational development and the quality of relationships among staff and the larger community. This project also explores the practice of Circle as a sacred gift from Indigenous peoples that has the capacity for creating individual, organizational, and community transformation in ways that can bring healing, love, authenticity and belonging to other initiatives working to end violence. The experiences from this project have led to a further exploration of how organizations might embody their core values and align with their mission, while examining the implications and applications of these insights on non-profit social change organizations.

### **Introduction**

In 2010 I began volunteering for a small, non-profit domestic and sexual violence agency in Vermont. My volunteering opportunity developed into an internship, which eventually led to a staff position. For the past three years, I have held a position as the Coordinator of Legal Advocacy. This organization was founded in 1981 in response to community needs around services for abused women and their children and has since expanded its services to include: supervised visitation and safe exchange, child and family advocacy, community advocacy, legal advocacy and 24-hour hotline services.

Our agency has a history rooted in social change, and over the last three years we have undertaken an effort to connect with broader anti-oppression efforts. We realized that we needed to reexamine our values if we truly wanted to contribute to the anti-violence movement. We began more deeply exploring the larger systems we wanted to change; recognizing that domestic and sexual violence are not isolated social problems, and that organizationally we needed to assess our values through a lens of anti-racist, anti-colonial practices (see Appendix A for larger context and history of these connections) . This process led to the adoption of leadership values that were committed to equity over hierarchy with consensus decision practices that centered the voices of staff and survivors. This involved examining the impacts of our whiteness while learning from, supporting and aligning ourselves with groups and organizations who are working to dismantle white supremacist, misogynistic, oppressive systems. In order to identify these values we had to acknowledge the racism within the history of the domestic and sexual violence movement.

Recently our organization has undergone a major transition with the departure of the Executive Director and discovery of significant financial challenges. This transition became the impulse for this project and provided the opportunity for me to utilize my own leadership practices to support equity during this transition while rooting out conscious or unconscious forms of oppression. This transition also offered me the opportunity to explore questions about shared leadership, relationships, and the role Circle process can play in supporting learning, creativity, equitable organizational culture, and strong communities.

Circle process is a sacred gift from indigenous peoples that can be demonstrated as a way of creating community, individual and organizational transformation. Circle process was shared with our organization by Dr. Sayra Pinto. Circle not only addresses social problems in the context of the community itself, but also seeks new ways of building relationship that does not rely on a hierarchical framework. Furthermore, it can transcend boundaries of systems, beliefs and structures inherently harmful to people of color and provide an alternative space for survivors of domestic and sexual violence to share their experiences, collectively creating a culture of belonging.

The origins of Circle are deeply rooted in indigenous principles and hold the intention of addressing oppression and power while empowering the voice of people of color as agents of change in their own communities. This is where Circle explores how oppression, trauma and violence interrupt relationship and the ways in which we show up for each other.

Circle is supported by four tenets of the native medicine wheel: Mind, Body, Spirit and Emotion. These tenets are then broken down into layers. Dr. Sayra Pinto

describes the Medicine Wheel as a map toward relationships to all of the earth, not just with other humans or people we already know. The practice of Circle is about expanding connectedness. Beyond the exploration of our individual selves, the medicine wheel guiding Circle points to relationship building. Our personal lives are reflected in Circle in that, in order to remain healthy and upright, we need to tend to these parts of ourselves regularly. When we are healthy as individuals, we can contribute to the health of our community more effectively.

Circle is deeply aligned with my own belief systems of love, equity, well-being and non-violence. I believe this practice provides the opportunity for me to show up most authentically and keeps me grounded in the purpose of building coalition (for more on Circle Process see Appendix B).

This project offered me the opportunity to actively engage in the practice of Circle within my organization and community while exploring four central questions:

1. In what ways might Circle serve as a practice for maintaining organizational stabilization during leadership transition?
2. How might Circle hold institutions accountable to their values?
3. How does Circle facilitate authentic relationship to our work? How does this practice keep us aligned with our purpose?
4. In what ways might Circle expand community connections and build relationship across difference?

## **Methods**

Over the last year, I have attempted to engage the staff of our organization and the community in Circle. The purpose of this engagement was in an effort to continue to build relationship with the community and survivors we serve while staying rooted in our anti-oppression mission throughout organizational transitions. In part, this effort was conducted through the design of a staff retreat, which would be facilitated and hosted by me. The focus of this retreat was for staff to re-connect with Circle and explore the broader mission and purpose of the organization.

In addition to Circle practice, the staff would address the roots of our organizational challenges in the larger context of domestic and sexual violence as a social problem. To do this, we would also utilize theory of change exercises and apply Eve Tuck's Problem Tree model (2008). (See Appendix B). In addition to my organizational work, I sought to address questions 3 and 4 (above) by sharing the practice of Circle with a group of High School students who have created a social justice group called Stand Up! I introduced Circle to them and returned multiple times over four months to continue sharing this practice and to continue a dialogue about how they may incorporate this practice into other anti-violence practices their group is utilizing to address oppression in their school and community.

### **Assessment Methods**

The methodological process described above was emergent and adaptive because of unexpected changes that unfolded over the last year. Throughout the course of this project I incorporated assessment strategies that provided opportunities for me to remain aligned with my project purpose while being open and flexible to unexpected outcomes, new emerging questions, and the themes the process presented.

In assessing the trajectory of my work as well as monitoring my ability to stay connected to my values and aspirations, I drew on key theoretical ideas of Toni Gregory & Odis Simmon's *Grounded Action: Achieving Optimal and Sustainable Change* (2003). Their research framework explores grounded theory as it relates to understanding the layers of social problems with a focus on action. This work builds on the grounded theory research methodology developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) point out, before the development of grounded theory, methods of social research focused mainly on how to deductively verify logically elaborated theories. They suggested it was equally important to have a method by which theories could be systematically generated, or "discovered," directly from data.

With a grounded theory orientation, the research problem is *necessarily* emergent, not preconceived. As Glaser (1992, p.25) notes:

"... the research question in a grounded theory study is not a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied. The problem emerges and questions regarding the problem emerge by which to guide theoretical sampling. Out of open coding, collection by theoretical sampling, and analyzing by constant comparison emerge a focus for the research."

Above all, the research problem in grounded action must be about the main concerns of participants in the action scene/context. As Glaser (1998, p.116) argues, "It is about time that researchers study the problem that exists for the participants in the area, not what is supposed to exist or what a professional says is important."

Following these ideas, the evaluation of my work with those impacted by sexual and domestic violence requires openness and willingness to take an inductive approach to

the feedback received from those with whom I work. This relational approach to receiving, tracking, and learning from interpersonal feedback was essential in the development of the recommendations listed below.

To assess my process, relationships and outcomes I gathered stories from staff, documenting their experience with Circle process and with the organizational transition. I also maintained a personal journal in which I tracked my own experience as well as patterns and effects of the transition on survivors and the broader community. The results and core insights described below grew from these processes and assessment practices.

Weekly conversations with Sayra Pinto, one of my project mentors, has been a critical piece of assessing my data and project outcomes. Sayra shared the gift of Circle with me and these weekly conversations provide support while illuminating potential blind spots around privilege, whiteness and the sacredness of a community change practice like Circle.

Additionally, over the course of the last sixth months I have facilitated two formative assessment meetings with my graduate studies committee. These meetings assisted in clarifying my intentions and provided support and feedback in relation to structure and organization of my project purpose. The results and core insights described below also grew from these processes and assessment practices.

## **Results**

This process was messy and complex. As our organization transitioned to a top-down hierarchical structure and management approach, my plans had to be altered to stay

in alignment with my values and aspirations. The impacts of the hierarchical management model became clear as shared leadership practices like Circle were abandoned and an organizational business and budgetary framework became priority.

Due to concerns over reactions from budgetary decisions, the Interim Executive director decided to cancel the staff retreat I had designed. In lieu of our retreat, I extended an invitation to the staff to gather in Circle to focus on three questions: What is happening? What do you need? What is next? In addition, I gathered stories from staff members about the organizational change process and the role of Circle in order to document impact and changes within the organization and to capture the community experience. These experiences and stories illuminated the importance of processes like Circle in maintaining relationships and addressing community needs and equity; especially during meaningful organizational change efforts.

One staff member described her experience with Circle and with the organizational changes as follows,

What Circle did...it created a space, like a transition. It was like the connection between who we are as individuals to how we are going to meet that goal unified. Now, let's talk about authenticity. We aren't using Circle practice and everyone is smiling, nodding and going about doing their job. Is that really authentic? Are we well internally? Circle connected us. It was that bond, that literal circle of energy that connected us to the work. Here we are on the outside, individuals in our own lives with our own beliefs. Here is the Circle and on the inside is the work we are doing to serve survivors. With our hearts and our being we felt what we were doing was real. Circle was the net that held us together. The net that caught the

yuck. It was the net that filtered out whatever we were going through to help us be ok to move forward and do the work in a meaningful way.

During the organizational transition a particularly challenging event occurred that involved the elimination of a position that was held by the only woman of color in a white organization. This individual and the staff were told that this part-time position needed to be cut due to budget restrictions. Furthermore, members of our organization took credit for this employee's personal side project on a grant report raising significant questions about equity and exploitation.

Without Circle, or another process rooted in anti-racist, anti-colonialist belief systems, there was no place to process the impacts of this decision on behalf of the marginalized person or to process what this means as an organization.

In sharing Circle with High School students, I discovered firsthand the power of this process within the context of community transformation. These students are using Circle to address oppression, violence and inequity within their school and broader community. They meet weekly to share experiences of racism, trans-phobia, homophobia, sexism and other stories of oppression (See Appendix D).

The students identified Circle as a practice they want to enact with the intention of creating spaces to host loving, authentic conversations that address harm in their school. They want to invite people causing harm into Circle and find ways to build relationship while maintaining accountability. I continue to meet with this group and co-host Circle with them over time as this project continues.

It is important to note the sensitivity and deeply personal experiences that are represented in the documentation process. As Toni Gregory (2003, section 4.6) asserts: “Participants in action scenes/contexts are usually also stakeholders in the action problem and how it is addressed.” For this action-oriented Masters Project, the results, experiences and the methodologies that I am sharing should not be confused with people being treated or viewed as “subjects.”

### Discussion

These diverse experiences throughout this project have helped me to see how hierarchical management practices can impact community needs, wellness practices, relationships, and limit social change. They have also helped me to better understand how hierarchal management practices differ from shared leadership practices like Circle Process.

The learnings that I have taken from this project can serve as a guide for other domestic and sexual violence non-profit organizations in Vermont. This project provides a platform for a conversation about how organizations can embody anti-violence practices internally in order to create the community change they wish to affect. It is clear that without shared leadership and community-centered organizational practices, these organizations can default to systems of inequity whose programmatic functions can harm survivors, marginalized populations and the communities they are trying to serve. In her article *Demarginalizing The Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) discusses many of the ways institutions and organizations perpetuate

white supremacist, sexist practices. In this particular section she draws our attention to the paradox of racist practices within organizations seeking to dismantle these systems when she suggests:

It is somewhat ironic that those concerned with alleviating the ills of racism and sexism should adopt such a top-down approach to discrimination. If their efforts instead began with addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remarked world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit. In addition, it seems that placing those who are currently marginalized in the center is the most affective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize and undermine potential collective action. (p. 167)

As this project seeks to center relationships and community needs, it has provided new learnings for me as I work to end violence. Documenting the impacts of hierarchical management practice has expanded my understanding of systematic oppression and reinforced the need for shared leadership through the illumination of central power and hierarchy as a failed design in community change initiatives.

Recently, I have been invited by the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence to present to their staff on the outcomes of this project as well as to share an introduction to Circle process. In addition, I will continue to engage with the Stand Up group of high school students and support them in their leadership around Circle practice and community building. Youth are the future and too our western culture silences the voices of young people.

This project has reminded me to continue to deeply listen to youth and empower them to be community change leaders in their communities. The process of experiencing this dramatic organizational change in contrast to the power of youth building community in Circle has inspired me to continue to share Circle as a practice and embody leadership values that continue to promote equity and love while holding relationships as central in order to empower whole communities with thriving, whole people.

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*Appendix A*

In her article *History of The Rape Crisis Movement* (2009) Gillian Greensite describes the history of the anti-rape movement through the experience of women of color. The anti-rape movement took hold in this country in the mid to late 1970's when white feminists co-opted years of foundational anti-rape led by women of color. This is when the domestic violence movement and anti-rape movement joined forces in women's liberation and women of color became excluded from the dominant domestic and sexual violence movement that is known as second wave feminism (2009).

Gillian Greensite goes on to explore the often forgotten, painful history of the connection between lynching and sexual violence and how this has impacted the modern movement to end domestic and sexual violence when she writes:

After slavery ended, sexual and physical violence, including murder, were used to terrorize and keep the Black population from gaining political or civil rights... the Klan raped Black women, lynched Black men and terrorized Black communities. Propaganda was spread that all Black men were potential rapists and all white women potential victims.

Since the 1800's, women of color in the United States, have led anti-rape efforts in conjunction with their efforts around anti-slavery and anti-lynching, women like Ida B. Wells who was one of the first women to organize anti-lynching campaigns.

*Appendix B*

Circle as taught by Sayra Pinto and Mass Circles is practice of twenty years co-created and inspired by a collaboration of change makers. Mass Circles describes their vision as “thriving communities creating their desired conditions of well being. Our mission is to support the enactment of circle process in the lives of communities. Our values are love, forgiveness, generosity, collaboration, and intentionality. Our strategies are implementation of learning journeys with individuals, groups, and organizations; consulting with individuals, groups, and organizations; and fomenting dialogues with groups.” Mass Circles has applied Circle with groups ranging from gangs to domestic violence organizations, to anti-racism practices with police, schools and hospitals.

Circle is a practice of community building that allows communities to live into their full potential of belonging. Circle provides the framework for understanding our authentic selves and how to be in authentic relationship with each other and the universe through a model of self-governance. While Restorative Justice programs are enacting their own forms of Circle practice, Mass Circles sees the practice of Circle as separate from the work of Restorative Justice. Circles in a restorative setting are generally offender focused and dominated by white people.

Circle also asks us to examine trust and what it takes for us to be in trusting relationships. The Medicine Wheel serves as a map toward relationships to all of the earth, not just with other humans or people we already know. The practice of Circle is about expanding connectedness. Next, the process guides us towards questions of connection to the larger universe and assessment of our own cosmology. Circle is fluid,

non-linear and on going, which provides the space for participants to imagine themselves as a small part of something larger. The humbling effect of placing ourselves in the context of the universe is a core belief in the native world that leads to a path of forgiveness.

**What does Circle look like?**

1. When a Circle is hosted we arrange ourselves physically in a circle with a purpose or intention for holding that space. There is often a centerpiece that is of value to the community hosting the circle. We have a quilt that was made for the organization and a candle of angels holding hands. We also have the elements fire and water represented in our Circle. Talking pieces are an essential part of Circle. This creates the space for all voices to be heard in their own authentic truths. At our organization we have a selection of talking pieces that hold significant meaning to those who have contributed them. Our talking pieces hold many stories. Creating the conditions for Circle is essential in building community.
2. Opening. This could be poem, song, quote or other way to transition people into the space.
3. There is a greeting from the hosts of the space who explain the process and set the intention for being together.
4. This is when the conversation happens with one person speaking at a time. The hosts often pose a question or topic for the group. Individuals can chose to pass when the talking piece gets to them.
5. Reflection. This is a chance to process what took place during the Circle. At our organization we often reflect with three central questions: What happened? What is next? And what do you need?

6. Closing. The closing is a way to transition out of Circle. This helps with reintegration into our lives. This could be a dance, a poem a song, a quote etc. At our organization we have compiled a basket of our favorites closings and people bring more to add to that basket.
7. A period of follow up can help people stay grounded in the process. This is particularly important as Circle brings up a lot of trauma for a lot of people. When we do Circle with survivors we realize how critical follow-up is. There is so much that is unsaid in Circle and to build beloved community we must attend to impacts.



*Appendix D*

This video clip was created by one of the Stand Up Students.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUqld8uklog>. In this clip we hear from each member of the group. They share stories and highlight the goals and mission of the group. Stand up is local to Craftsbury and Hardwick Vermont. On their Facebook page you can find information about upcoming fundraising events as well as events they co-sponsor. Additionally, The Art House in Craftsbury is a sponsor of theirs and also shares the groups activity on their website <http://www.vermontarthouse.org>