ber of hours each staff member would now be spending in circle meetings under the evolved model. Under the earlier system, the yearly cost of wages for staff and practitioners to attend circle meetings came to $492,000. Under the evolved model, costs are $360,000, for a savings of $132,000. "These figures represent our best effort to quantify time spent in meetings," explained Tom. "This is a useful accounting for any organization, whether meetings take place in a more hierarchical form or in circle as they do at True North."

True North has worked diligently to examine its inner workings. The openness of its process is a tribute to the organizers' genuine belief in the statement from their Web site: "We feel that circle process is healing our multidisciplinary wounds and that it is the container for the momentum of our strong and fearless group to nurture a professional experience that is beyond our wildest dreams (and keeps getting better). The continuous work of the circle has provided us with the most functional place we have ever worked, where we have fun and take risks because of the trust we have in each other and in spirit."

People at True North acknowledge that looking critically at circle process allowed them to develop an evolved version that better suits "who we are now." For Tom, the combination of good business practices, continuous process improvement, and a heart-centered approach is what makes True North a powerful place.

Reflections

We have watched these colleagues and many others adapt and refine circle to fit a wide variety of settings and applications and still hold the integrity of PeerSpirit's basic infrastructure. We made a decision at the start of our work not to trademark our adaptation of such a universal process and social lineage or to certify facilitators. We have practiced honoring our teachers, sources, and circle's lineage itself and relied on other people's willingness to do the same as they have carried circle process into their own words and work. We have counted on people practicing at the edge of their confidence and learning as they go—as have we. By and large, this has served us all well. We are delighted to offer so many stories of people who have read about PeerSpirit Circle Process and thought, *I can do this.* They tried it, and it worked, and they have figured out how to keep working with circle—with and without our engagement. We consider this a huge indicator of the circle's resilience and capacity to adapt to an ever-changing world.

CHAPTER 12

Circle as a Way of Life

Once upon a time, circle was the core of human culture. That time has come round again in a new evolution. The circle way is a take-it-home, take-it-to-work, try-it-anywhere practice. Circle is a life skill with the power to sustain both intimacy and cultural change.

Hurrying through the chaos of the world's busyness, circle offers us opportunities to sit down with each other in the round, to ring the bell and quiet our hearts and minds, and to enter the spaciousness to speak and listen to one another as we find our way forward. This amazing capacity is available to anyone, at any time, with any group of people. Anyone who has read this far now understands how to host the social container; how to place an inviting question into the center, pass a talking piece, pause, and receive people's responses.

We live the circle way one conversation at a time, one group at a time. Through incremental daily changes of mind-set and behavior that make the world around us a friendlier place, we see how the tenets of the circle way can emerge:

- *The circle way is relational.* It occurs wherever people create an intentional social space of compassion and curiosity.
- *The circle way is inclusive and adaptable.* It seeks to restore principles of belonging and to find meaningful ways for everyone to contribute.

- *The circle way is a synthesis of our human journey.* It can occur now because we have the full story of our origins and history, increasingly global literacy, and an interconnected world.

Learning circle is an adventure. We can learn through careful, step-by-step instruction, or we can learn by jumping in and trying it. We can go on to use circle skills in complex situations, or we can enjoy circle as an occasional venture beyond the norm. Circle is like dropping a round, smooth stone into the waters of the social pond. The stories in this final chapter are intended as an invitation and an inspiration to begin incorporating circle and its inherently collaborative way of being into ever-widening circles of application and rings of influence in our lives.

Couples and the Circle Way

It has been our experience that using circle within a partnership greatly enhances communication and supports mutually beneficial outcomes. This example speaks of marriage, but there are many forms of personal and professional partnerships in which similar rituals of communication are needed and could apply.

One of the major causes of miscommunication between partners is introducing a conversation without the time or social container to actually have the conversation. We call this "drive-by commentary," and it can become a way of life for busy, working people. On the way out the door, one partner says to the other, "Honey, we have to talk about finances. See you this evening." Coffee cup is set on the counter, and before the other partner can ask, "Is everything OK?" the first one's gone.

The receiver of this news may respond with fear, defensiveness, or a sense of helplessness or impending doom. When the conversation does occur, it tends to start off with a lot of confusion because so much ambiguity has been generated. And even if the news is good, enough tension has accumulated that each partner tends to have a defensive edge and difficulty hearing the other.

In couples retreat weekends, we give each couple some training in circle structure, an empty basket, and time to create their own agreements, intention, and an informal agenda of what issues they need to talk about. They are invited to fill the basket with meaningful objects for their centerpiece.

Sam and Krista had been married for three decades, raised two children, and were enjoying their two young grandchildren. Both were accomplished professionals at the height of their careers. Drive-by commentary had become

habitual—especially during the last years of child rearing, negotiating their work schedule and overseeing the extracurricular lives of two teens. The kids went off to college and then launched into adulthood, and Sam and Krista filled in the spaces with increasingly demanding twelve- to fourteen-hour workdays. Things were OK between them, but they had lost the sense that they were building a life and a life story together.

Krista said, "We wanted something back, a kind of spark, and a sense that we were each other's best friend—and at fifty-five, it's a whole different scene than at twenty-five or thirty-five. We couldn't go back, and we didn't know how to go forward. I wanted to go to therapy, and Sam said, 'Why? Nothing's wrong. If we go to therapy, they'll just find something wrong.' He had a point. So we signed up for a woodsy circle weekend retreat."

Their presenting intention was to practice circle by speaking and listening honestly, making clear decisions, and catching up on what was going on under the surface in each other's lives. They decided to call each other into circle once a week. We suggested a format where each partner would speak uninterrupted for a designated period of time, be responded to by the listener, and then switch roles. After these long check-ins, they could go into conversation council, discuss whatever was needed between them, and check out with a statement of understanding of what they'd learned or committed to. They established several guidelines for themselves (Exhibit 12.1).

No deserting the conversation unless the house is burning down. Their circle ritual is simple. He gets the basket and lays out the center: a small cloth, a few photos, and an heirloom silver spoon for a talking piece. She lights the candle; he rings the bell. They have a brief discussion about what needs to happen next: how long they can be in circle and whether or not their general check-in needs to be followed by specific topics. Sam rings the bell again, and they both

EXHIBIT 12.1

Working Agreements for Couples
○ Make sure we have time to start and finish.
○ Make sure we are both awake and present.
○ Turn off the cell phones.
○ Get comfortable.
○ No interruptions during each other's opening monologues.

sit quietly for a moment. One of them picks up the spoon, and the other sets a little kitchen timer, usually for ten minutes. They each take turns holding the talking piece and expressing everything they can think of about what's going on in their lives. At the end of the ten minutes (which sometimes contains some significant pauses for thinking), the other person spends several minutes reflecting what was heard and asking questions. Then they reverse roles. Once they have each spoken, they place the spoon on the coffee table between them and begin an open conversation about their check-ins and any topics they have cited. They do their best to wind things down in the allotted time—ringing a bell to close the space and returning the circle basket to its place on the dresser.

"I had no idea how hard it would be to say something about myself for ten minutes," Sam reports. "I wasn't tapped into anything underneath my to-do list. Krista would be sitting there. I'd say, 'I'm fine. What else do you want to know?' And she'd smile at me and ask quietly, 'What do you want me to know?' We cut these opening exchanges to five minutes, and then I eventually discovered enough story inside myself to extend the time—and so did she. You get so out of the habit of going into anything in detail because there never seems to be time for anyone to hear the detail. That's the habit we had to change. And we did. We know each other better than ever, and that's pretty great."

The stability that comes from the exchange of sharing story, sharing thoughts and feelings and doubts, is the reward for circle in partnerships. The important components are there: having a beginning and an ending point and an agreed time for meeting, giving each person uninterrupted time to check in as deeply as possible and for the other to listen and then exchange a few minutes of mirroring back what was heard. We have often suggested that people keep a small notebook in their basket and a log of their councils—just a few sentences that leave a map of the conversation or a question to be considered the next time.

As elsewhere, the right question can be a powerful invocation in couples' circles. The son of some friends called us in near tears. "I think my girlfriend is about to break up with me, and I don't want to lose her. We're just not communicating, and I'm doing the best I can. What can I do?"

We thought for a minute, and then a question came to mind. "Create a quiet place with no distractions, and ask her this question," Christina prompted. "'What do you need me to know right now so I can love you better?' See what happens next."

Families and the Circle Way

The challenge of careful listening is magnified in a family setting because there are more people of more ages and more interests. Ann began trying circle with her children when they were teenagers. She set up specific times and protocols for having "conversations of consequence." She soon discovered that when she announced that they would be having a circle, both her teens gave each other that "What did we do now?" look.

Realizing her mistake, Ann stopped using circle at home for a few months. Then she introduced the idea of appreciation circles to Brian and Sally. Once a month, they would all sit after dinner with a candle and a talking piece resting in the middle of the dining room table. When they were ready, one at a time, they would reach for the talking piece and share a story or comment that showed their appreciation for each other member of the family. These experiences were short and often humorous, and they restored the positive impression of circle.

About that same time, Brian came home from yet another soccer game loss in the midst of a miserable season. The sport was a new addition at his high school, and the team was pitted against more experienced teams from bigger schools. "Hey, Mom," he yelled from the kitchen. "I tried that circle stuff with the team, and I think it worked. We lost another game, and the coach asked me to cheer everyone up—to keep us going for the next few weeks. So I put us all in a huddle and asked, 'What's the most important thing we're learning this fall—that's not about winning and losing?' I used the soccer ball for a talking piece, and I didn't know what to use for a centerpiece, so I just stood there myself." Mother and son high-fived each other.

Christina's mother is a vibrant eighty-nine-year-old at the writing of this book. Partly because she has always appeared more youthful than her age, when she turned seventy-five, she requested that her family create a ritual to mark her passage into her elder years. Children, grandchildren, and spouses gathered from Alaska, Washington, and Wisconsin at the Minneapolis home of Connie's older son, Carl.

Together the four siblings, spouses, and six grandchildren created two concentric rings of yarn on the rug of the family den: a red one for the blood line and a green one for those related by marriage. Connie sat in the center. In this appreciation circle, everyone held a carnation and was invited to share a story

that honored the family matriarch. Some of the stories were humorous; some were poignant. By the time each story had been told, Connie held a bouquet of flowers. She then shared some reflections on aging and the importance of honoring the voice of elders.

About this same time, Christina regularly hosted "Auntie Camp" for her nieces—four little girls sitting cross-legged on the floor, each one speaking through the voice of a favorite stuffed animal. "Little Tiger says . . . ," "Bearie Bearie says . . ." It was a hilarious check-in full of giggles; even the animals were amused at themselves. What got said during these evenings has disappeared from memory, but the importance of circle in family life has remained. These nieces, now in their twenties, remain willing participants whenever Auntie Christina rings the bell.

Friends and family attend birthdays, weddings, retirements, and anniversaries wanting to honor whoever is being celebrated and to make authentic connection with people they probably don't see very often. The addition of circle creates a container to hold the intentions people bring and their desire to connect more deeply than social banter. Several examples of family ritual have already been presented in these pages.

When Ann's grandson, Jaden, turned four, his parents, Sally and Joe, invited his preschool friends to a local park for bouncing in an inflatable palace, face painting, a Batman piñata, and cake. Afterward, the young family of three, plus three grandparents, an aunt, a friend, and a cousin, all gathered in their apartment. People carried in many gifts from the party and set them in the middle of the living room carpet. Jaden sat down next to his presents and announced, "I want everyone to sit in a circle." We smiled and willingly obeyed. Then the little host announced, "Now I want us to hold hands."

"OK, Mom, he's a convert," laughed Sally. "They do this every morning in preschool, and he sees that people pay better attention if you gather them this way."

Neighbors and the Circle Way

Cynthia Trenshaw likes to tell the story of how she created a circle to address some of the deeper questions about aging that were beginning to nag at her as a sixty-year-old in a new community. After a year or so getting to know a variety of people, Cynthia gathered a small group of new friends and formally created a PeerSpirit circle to address questions of aging. Five years later, the group still meets twice a month. "We are continuously amazed and amused at how we came together, how we have grown, and how deep our individual roots have sunk into the soil of circle. We are now fourteen men and women, aged forty-something to seventy-something—four couples, four singles, and two partnered people who are in the circle without their partners."

Fourteen members has proved to be a good number for ensuring that enough people are always present to sustain the conversation and not so large that it's impossible to remember all the stories. The group operates with a rotating host, guardian, and scribe. Once a year, at a potluck, they think up topical questions of interest and lay out the conversational map for the next twelve months. They hold an annual retreat at a small local conference facility and use the time to share stories and activities that would not fit in their usual two-hour meeting format. They cook together, experiment with arts and crafts projects, enjoy silence and reading, and do whatever else strikes their fancy.

Group members have shared deep conversations about living well and dying well. They have helped each other write advance directives and letters to families explaining their wishes. "We have had to go down some tough roads with one another," explained Cynthia. "We didn't have too much trouble talking about the nitty-gritty stuff of tending to someone who is ill, but when individual members have needed bedside care, we discovered that we are not actually very good at it. We are not trained professionals, and that's OK. We had to learn the boundaries with respect to what we can and cannot do."

In one situation, a husband and wife became seriously ill at the same time. The man had been the steady caregiver in the pair, so when he got ill, the Circle of Caring was called to a new level of commitment, offering help with meals and hospital visitations and organizing professional assistance. "That was a pivotal time for us," explained Cynthia.

> "People got stretched pretty thin, and only coming back to circle and talking about these challenges got us through.
>
> "We are supporting each other in what are literally life-and-death topics, and it requires that we do our work around shadow. That's become a term we all know. There have been moments halfway through a long check-in when there was so much tension in the room, I couldn't imagine how we would get through something and leave one another at the end of the evening with a sense of peace. We

aren't usually confrontational; rather, we have learned an increasing tolerance for the things in each of us that are not going to change. And we use the center profoundly—that's where our tolerance for each other's personalities resides."

Not surprisingly, the circle has had requests from others who would like to join. Members have handled this by sponsoring several new local groups, and in 2004, Cynthia wrote a booklet on the subject, *Harvest of Years: A PeerSpirit Guide for Proactive Aging Circles*. When a Seattle newspaper story on the group went national, we received hundreds of orders for the booklet, and Cynthia became a telephone circle coach and occasional conference speaker.

Community and the Circle Way

In August 2008, public interest consultant Jim Neale traveled from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Whidbey Island, Washington, to take the Circle Practicum. A few weeks later, having returned home, he had a great opportunity to try out his new skills. For the past several years, residents of a small agricultural village (established in 1674, population 600) near Halifax had struggled with the question of whether an abandoned rail line which had been converted into a trail that ran through the community should be open to use by motorized vehicles. Many residents were opposed, believing that the community was better served by preserving a serene space suitable for bicycling and safe for the many seniors to walk. Others favored motorized use by all-terrain vehicles whose drivers wanted to access hundreds of kilometers of other trails already open to ATVs, to boost tourism in the region, and to provide a wider range of recreation options.

The issue had created a palpable rift in the community. Discussions began to take place mostly among small special-interest groups. In any "mixed" sessions, residents faced aggressive oppositional views and quickly fell silent. No progress was made over nine months of community meetings. People lapsed into frustration, polarization, exhaustion, and the belief that a good resolution wasn't possible. Jim reported:

"I was asked to develop a process for the conversations and then facilitate them, ideally producing a consensus (it would never be unanimous) view for trail use and for how to begin a sense of social healing. Having just returned from a PeerSpirit Practicum fully jazzed about the fruits of circle and eager to give it a try, I was game to experiment. I was also careful to harmonize the approach with the more conservative nature of the community.

"I developed a process that started with consultations with community representatives to envision the kind of community they wanted and to establish the more fundamental and common intention for the community. What emerged was a clear desire for a strong and united community, honoring its long traditions of neighbors helping neighbors."

Jim discovered a shared value for a community that had been harmed by the outbursts of diverse opinion. This is a common consequence in settings where there has not been a group process in place that could deal effectively with differences of opinion. Jim set about trying to rectify the situation by designing a series of three circles, one for each of the three primary special-interest groups:

- Individuals who owned land adjacent to the trail, who would be most affected by the decision
- Hikers
- Motorized vehicle users

He wanted to create an opportunity where people could become comfortable expressing their views without concern about confrontation. After each of the three circles had occurred, he offered a fourth circle for the entire community, where the practiced viewpoints could now be brought forward for the benefit of the whole.

He described the circle process this way:

"In each preparatory circle, we established a center that reflected the shared vision for the community as a town of neighbors helping neighbors. The center point was an antique bowl (representing the long and colorful history of the village) that began empty to represent a 'fresh start.' After checking in, we spent a little time role-playing some of the behaviors people might expect to see in the large circle as they addressed this emotional issue (quiet anger, rage, protectiveness of more frail residents, and so on). The role-plays gave people a

chance to put the behaviors they were concerned about out front, ham it up, laugh a little, and become more able to recognize these behaviors and then practice calling for the bell."

This was a creative way to dispel the shadow—to give people an opportunity to play with their own and each other's impulses for control. Then Jim led people into practicing clear statements and neutral language so that they would be confident in their ability to maintain focus and make their point in the midst of whatever energies were swirling in the container of the larger group. He would be the host and guardian and enforce the etiquette of circle process. One of the skills Jim brought into this community process was his ability to coach each of the polarized interest groups and offer each of them a sense that they had his support in making positive contributions to the conversation.

Then came the open circle for all interested community members. Throughout the circle time, Jim invited participants to write their hopes, concerns, and ideas for community healing on small cards and deposit them in the center bowl. He later said, "I did this in part to provide a private and very safe avenue to express views (which proved to be very important to some of the more senior participants), and also, as the bowl filled, the presence of intention grew in strength, scope, and importance—and to my amazement, converged toward a more shared aspiration for the village."

One of the participants, an elderly woman with terminal cancer, lived very close to the trail. The quieter environment needed for her care appeared incompatible with motorized use. "Many of the residents had become involved in this issue to protect her right to live in a health-preserving setting," Jim said.

> "As this woman told her story, it became clear that the rift in the community was also a cause of pain for her and that her deepest wish was for reconciliation and healing. She surprised everyone by announcing that for that reason, she was going to support reopening the trail to vehicles.
>
> "She offered a clear and present challenge to the circle that compelled compromise and creativity to find the best possible solution. It was a magnificent breakthrough moment. They reframed what the trail was: not an old rail line but a community commons—shared land. Closing the trail to motorized use would prevent members of the community from using a village commons and was therefore not consistent with the vision they held of a united community. Opening the trail through these conversations of shared hope and sensitivity became the only acceptable conclusion."

This is an example of the alchemy of circle: a conclusion is discovered that no one walked in with, that seems to have grown out of the group process itself. At the end of the evening, Jim reported:

> "The session went exceptionally well—like nothing the residents (or I) had experienced before when addressing divisive issues within a small, close, and very conservative community. A strong consensus view emerged that included better understandings, beginnings of real forgiveness, a fresh faith that they could work together to bring about a good end result, and acceptance of the need to move forward even when some people are going to be disappointed by the outcome. Circle provided an extremely powerful alternative to conversations of self-interest and reinforced basic community values."

The townspeople felt resolved, but Jim was still nervous. The actual owner of the rail bed, and the entity that had commissioned Jim to lead this process, was the provincial Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Upon reporting the results, Jim was concerned that the minister, a political representative, might choose to decide in favor of more powerful minority interests and override the consensus wishes of the community. In that case, dynamics would not simply revert to the previous state; they'd be worse. "Having raised the expectations of citizens, if the DNR made a political choice, it would deepen distrust of government and the malaise of residents. This would be a concern in any organizationally based circle work I can imagine doing, where group progress could be overturned by a higher authority." While this is a worthy caution, in this case, the consensus recommendation was accepted, the trail reopened, and healing began.

Circle is a portable craft. To almost every meeting she attends, Christina carries *tingsha* bells, a talking piece, and an ability to synthesize thematic conversational threads. Ann brings her listening ear, a kitchen timer, and an ability to ask the question that opens the door to personal storytelling.

People know when they're not being respectful of one another. Almost everyone has enough skill to help bring a situation back to productiveness if a tiny opening appears. Circle as community intervention can be a whole process, carefully thought out as Jim modeled, or some aspect of circle can be introduced into a moment where it's needed. We just need patience to watch for the moment when an intervention will most likely work and the courage to assume a bit of leadership.

At a gathering to address the future of a local landmark, Christina was standing against the back wall in a large crowd. At one point, there were many community members talking over one another. To gain the attention of the moderators, she loudly rang the *tingsha* bells she carried in her jacket pocket. People were so surprised at the high resonating sound that everyone stopped talking for a few seconds. The pause gave her a chance to say, "I rang the bell because I can't hear what anyone is saying when everyone is talking at once. Could we go back to raising hands and waiting for the moderator to call on us?" People complied, and order was restored. The moderator looked relieved.

Twenty minutes later, the energy in the room had again increased, and people were interrupting one another to get their opinion or question expressed. Someone from the audience called out, "Where is that lady with the bells?" Obligingly, Christina rang them again.

From the back of the room, without any role in the proceedings other than that of an interested citizen, she could not call this town meeting to order—but she could call it to pause, and in that pause, the possibility for order rests in the hands of the majority. There is the opportunity for civility to prevail, for leadership to swirl out of the crowd and to insist that the underlying values of community and neighborliness be carried through the conversational thread. Jim Neale and the citizens of his Nova Scotia town practiced civility; the Kufunda villagers in Zimbabwe practiced it; the church that surrounded Pastor Larry practiced it. Just as the wisdom we need is in the room, the core values we need are in the room and can remind us who we are.

Circle works in the world we have. It works in the concentric rings around our lives at work, at home, and in our communities. And it is the deepest prayer of this book that hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of self-empowered circle practitioners will call on circle to work in the world of the future.

The Future and the Circle Way

When you leave this book, you will have acquired the tools to make a better world—certainly to make your own personal world better. Better in what ways? We don't know; you know. Sit down and talk your dreams into being so that your actions are clear and grounded in strong principles. The promise that we made—that we can mold and change the world of human interaction to fit our needs—is true.

The ecophilosopher Joanna Macy refers to the time we are living in as the "Great Turning." She says in a video on her Web site, "The Great Turning is a name for the essential adventure of our time: the shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization." The concept is echoed by Thomas Berry, who refers to it as the "Great Work." It is taught in college courses. E. F. Schumacher references it in his "Small Is Beautiful" movement. The alternative economist David Korten has written a book titled *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*. We are all living in an experience larger than our ability to perceive, swallowed into the light and shadow of our turning times.

In the early 1990s, we became aware that circle process was coming through a number of voices and lineage streams. In the early 2000s, we became aware that a culture of conversation was going global through a number of circle-based methodologies and variations. Now we are aware that a community of visionary social scientists is calling forth the next stage of social evolution. Macy says this is the third great revolution. "The 'life-sustaining society' that is emerging," Macy says, "needs structures that are deeply rooted in common human values and resilient enough to take us into the future."

We would like to nominate the circle as a structure for helping us safely make this turn. Everything and anything we do with circle today, tomorrow, and in reaction to reading this book is practice for holding on to our civility in the chaos of enormous change.

The image of the Great Turn empowers everyone: everyone can turn. We can make daily turns in our lives that head us toward the life-sustaining society, and then we can take leadership in our spheres of influence to help others take turns toward such a society.

Put a dozen people in the circle and ask the question "What is coming?" and we get a dozen answers. Technological marvels? Social collapse? The fifth