

If you're on the water in a kayak, there are times to paddle and times to rest. The voice of the bell calls us into a little eddy, to rest in the swirl that's not rushing downriver or caught in the current. Participants know that the guardian is watching the waters; that the rest of us can stretch, relax, take our paddles out of the water, look around, and then start paddling again, refreshed.

Holding the Container in a Storm

As a highly skilled kayaker, Ann is a great student of weather. She knows the first faint changes in wind, current, and clouds can mean the difference between getting safely back to shore or being caught in high seas. When paddling, she is our weather guardian, attuned to nuances that the rest of us don't yet notice. We may have started out on a calm, sunny morning, and then conditions start to change. There's no stopping the weather. It is by its very nature changeable: the winds will come up and the tides will ebb and flow and the calm will return.

When looking back at on the weather of circle, there is often a similar sense of inevitability: energy will intensify and subside, we will feel incredibly connected in heart and mind, and we will feel nearly torn asunder. As long as we keep leaning into the conversational structure and tending the social container, we will find our way back to calm seas. What makes these experiences of weather and wobbliness worthwhile is that successful self-governance is ours to celebrate. Circle is an experience of being truly grown up, capable of managing the impulses of our own internal reactions and handling the impulses and reactions of others—not perfectly but satisfactorily.

Throughout this book, the illustrative stories focus on conversational infrastructure so that we learn to trust our capacities when the weather changes, when the Geiger counter suddenly starts clicking, when our hearts race with the bigness of what's occurring—and we're right in the middle of it. Energy shows up in the circle because it is a container. Energy shows up in us because we are containers.

Though it had been accumulating and dissipating in a project team for several months, there was a moment when tension between Diana, the human resource representative, and Doug, the technology expert, came to a head. Diana had the talking piece at the end of a round of idea generation, and Doug interjected a comment just as she was making her point. "I get it, Dee. Can we just move on?"

Diana stopped, disconcerted and surprised. "Dammit, Doug. You've interrupted me every time I've talked for the past week!"

"No, I haven't," Doug countered.

"Well, you just did it again. The purpose of this thing is to give me a chance to finish my thoughts without interruption." She shook the talking piece, a chunk of polished agate the host had brought for use that day, at Doug. She took several deep breaths and went red in the face. The host and guardian looked at each other across the circle. Several people stiffened a little. Group energy shifted into "level orange."

Doug, not noticing, plowed on with his next comment. "I don't get why you're so touchy. I'm trying to get something done in this circle process, not just process!" He pushed back his chair as though wishing to eject himself from the rim. The invisible arrows had just been thrown with force across the space—and the guardian and host had been caught off guard in the few seconds of heated exchange.

Mike, the host, recovered and asked for the bell. "Hey, Susan, ring that thing!" he called out. She did. Everyone paused and looked to him for guidance. "OK," he said, "I think there's an issue here we'd better talk about—and I'm not sure what it is. Are you two willing to go there?"

Though it may seem counterintuitive, it is most helpful to slow down when tension rises instead of speeding up. Tension is a yellow light—if everyone speeds into the intersection, there's going to be a crash. Pausing the action allows everyone a chance to put on the brakes and let the momentum roll to a safe stop. Energy is rolling around like a loose hubcap. People need to take a breath and make sure they are grounded in their own hoops so they can hold the rim, hold the center, and see how to contribute to whatever is going to happen next. Mike may not know exactly what's going on, but he is wise enough to call the conflict forward, to see the tension as something that requires group attention.

"I'm willing," said Diana. Her voice shook with emotion, and she started to tap her foot nervously on the carpeting, looking increasingly agitated.

Agitation is a signal that a lot of energy is running through someone. Diana may have been agitated before Doug interrupted her; maybe no one noticed, not even herself. This is not group therapy: this is business. We have an expectation—or at least a tendency to hope—that whatever is going on in the background for Diana, for Doug, and for any member of the group will be pulled

into their hoops and tucked away so that we can proceed with the anticipated topics. Sometimes this is possible; sometimes it's not. We all have in our personal hoops a little trash bin where we can deposit the imperfections of interaction and our reactions to them and keep them out of the way so we can move forward. Even if it is business, or the Parent-Teacher Association or Monday night at the League of Women Voters, our histories and vulnerabilities are with us—we need to get the banana peels out of the way. And then something happens, a slipping point, and the trash bin turns into a careening Dumpster that breaks out of our personal hoop and into the space of the group.

Mary, the woman seated next to Diana, reached over and squeezed her forearm gently. "It's OK," she said. "It's OK."

The woman doesn't actually know whether it's OK or not. She's made a calculated choice to try to help Diana ground her energy by offering a comforting gesture and phrase. She's hoping to interrupt the circuitry of agitation and invite Diana to compose herself.

Doug turned to Mike. "Can we do this in five minutes?"

"We can try," Mike paused to gather his thoughts. "We've got a basically good circle process going here. I don't know what's really irritating the two of you; maybe it's a bigger issue—maybe it's the tension between thinking and doing. So, first Diana and then Doug, let's see what—"

Mike's sentence was cut off by a throaty cry from Diana, who exploded into an angry diatribe about how circles are manipulative, cults of personality, how she feels like a pawn, how the men take all the space. People sat shocked, surprised, and unsure what to do next. Adrenaline was pumping through everyone's veins. Alert level went to red. Susan's hands twitched holding the bells: when to ring? Should she interrupt? This felt horrible, but maybe Diana was "asking for what she needed" by dumping her load. Mike gave her a nod. She rang the bell loudly—jarring their ears, but the sound penetrated Diana's harangue. She stopped talking and burst into tears. "Whoa," exclaimed Mike. "I've got no clue here, guys." The group sat frozen in place listening to Diana cry, totally uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, the circle is holding. Everything is happening in the only way it can happen—even though all kinds of impulses are firing off in people's minds and bodies, even though "fight or flight" is pumping through the amygdala, people are hanging on to the infrastructure while they figure out how to restore the social container.

The flash flood of Diana's trauma is contained, has moved through. What feels threatening is the unknown. The wisdom of recovery from this event has not yet emerged. The only thing that can get this group in trouble right now is if people jump out of the energetic presence into judgment: being critical of Diana's falling apart, of Doug's insensitivity, of Mike's clumsiness, of their own ineptness and the stupidity of trying this circle stuff anyway. . . .

The guardian rang the bell again, more gently in the stillness, leaned in and spoke clearly and firmly, looking around the group and making eye contact with anyone who would look back at her. ["Everyone in this circle has a job: hold the center, stay on the rim. We'll figure this out together." There was a palpable energetic shift as people calmed themselves through Susan's instruction.

Meanwhile, Diana hunched over her lap trying to pull herself together. "I'm so sorry . . . I'm so embarrassed . . . I'm so sorry . . . Don't look at me . . .," she recited.

"Gosh, Dee," Doug exclaimed, "I didn't mean to bring on anything like this."

"Can I touch your back?" Mary inquired. Dee nodded, and Mary placed a hand between Diana's shoulder blades. "It's OK," she whispered again. "Truly, it's going to be OK. Is there a story behind these feelings?" Diana nodded but did not look up. Mary continued, "We need your help, Diana, to put the circle back together. Can you tell us what's going on inside you?"

Leadership has rotated, responsibility is being shared, and the group is relying on its wholeness being restored. There is a host, a guardian, and a friend. Diana's agitation is lessening, and now a sense of electrical discharge is floating around looking for where it needs to land next. Grounding out. Energy wants to attach: so the guardian's instructions are helpful reminders to put the lightning in the center—don't take the hit.

First Diana and Doug took their arrows from the center and threw them at each other. When Diana exploded, all the others took their arrows and threw them up in the air. Mike and Susan have caught their arrows and reattached them to the center. Susan's instructions invite each participant to catch his or her own arrow and reestablish the stability of the wheel. Diana's arrow is broken in her lap; Doug's is behind his back—he's not sure he's coming in until he knows he's not the scapegoat.

Mike was breathing again, drawing from the center to steady himself. He looked around the group. "OK, people, let's take a minute and do an energy check. I think Mary's right: hearing the story will put the circle back on track. I am willing to listen to whatever Diana has to say as long as she doesn't shout at us. Everyone can make a choice: stay if you can, leave if you need to; the rim will hold, and we'll call you back later." Everyone stayed.

As host, Mike's decision to let people choose to stay or leave was a risk. What if everyone had left? How then would they have put the circle back together? But the choice itself was significant, and now that things had calmed a bit, they were curious, and supportive. They did have a pretty good circle process going—and they wanted it to keep going.

You may be thinking right now, if this is what's going to happen in circle, I don't want to be there. Well, this is what happens anyway, with or without circle. People get their feelings hurt, old patterns break through, resentments mount and never get resolved; five years from now, Doug and Diana could have no idea where the enmity between them started. Without a container for a conversation that never happened, maybe they've built up factions and polarized the office environment. Maybe they've become less than their best selves and don't even know it, though their coworkers gossip about their dysfunction, how they don't seem suited for the positions they hold, and why administration doesn't replace them is anybody's guess. Circle didn't cause this eruption: it is simply dealing with it openly, and something important is being cleared in the moment.

People are learning to be present during another's volatility and not get into the drama, not take it on. As they integrate their experience in the circle this morning, they will be able to apply it in other areas of their work and lives. Diana blew up: nobody fought back. Diana crumpled: nobody tried to fix her. Even in her emotional state, Mary and Mark are working with Diana as a colleague, asking her to tend to the well-being of the social container, to help mend what got torn, to bring her story forward so that people might understand and move on.

"Let's have another breather," said the guardian. She rang the bell softly. A kind of relief and readiness settled over the group. Energy alert deescalating. The bell rang again.

Diana sat up and stared at the center. She spoke of her high school girls' volleyball coach who used the circle to create a cult of personality around himself. "We were like followers. We would have done anything he asked," she said. "It was

so scary. He took all that adolescent intensity and fed off it. He never touched me, but I wanted him to, and that scared me even more. I thought I was going to hell. He said we were going to state." Mary kept her hand on Diana's back.

This is not business as usual. No one came into the meeting that morning anticipating tension, disruption, time-out from the agenda, or being asked to witness human suffering; it just happened. It happened because the circle was strong enough for it to happen. The web between these people will be even stronger as each person has a sense of increasing interpersonal courage. Circle calls us to show up and be ready to witness the troubles that collect in each other's hearts. And so the clouds break open, it thunders, it rains. The storm goes into the center—and the rainbow eventually comes.

The host and guardian did not immediately know what to do—and that's all right. There is no formula. Slow down. Pause. Focus on the center. Make a helpful gesture. Discover the way forward by trusting the wisdom in the room.

Ten minutes passed from the first exchange over Doug's interruption to the end of her story, and then Diana was able to look up from the center into Doug's face. "First of all," she said to Doug, "you are not him. It's not anything you did wrong, I just got triggered. I'm sorry."

Doug exhaled. "Well, I'm glad you don't think I'm like him. But I am kind of a control freak, and I coach my youngest daughter's T-ball team. I'm impatient. I'm the guy who likes to get things done. It makes my day to have a long to-do list in my Blackberry and just tick those items off like a speed demon. This circle process is way out of the box for me. I wasn't expecting this."

"Me neither," said Diana. "It's taking everything I've got not to run out of here and resign from the team because I'll feel foolish for the rest of my life."

Mary spoke. "No way, girl. We need your perspective. And every single person in this circle has something inside them we never told. I can think of two of them myself right now." Heads nodded. "You just went through the wash cycle for all of us."

"You OK then, Diana?" Mike asked. "Let's take a ten-minute break, stretch, open the windows in here, get a cold drink. Then we'll come back and see what we need to do next."

"Can I say one more thing?" Diana unfurled her fingers from the smooth, round stone. "I still have the talking piece," she said, and this time she smiled. "First of all, thank you. Thanks for just listening. For not making me feel weirder than I'm making myself feel. And Doug, I don't think we're going to have ongoing tension,

but if I do frustrate you, just have the guardian ring the bell, and I promise to get to the point."

Doug laughed with relief. "I can do that," he said. And everyone rose up, eager for a break. Now they are all in current time. Now they are reattached to spaciousness.

This is a vulnerable moment in circle process. The breakthrough is so fresh that it needs everyone's consciousness to hold it honorably. During the break, tension will turn into relief to have found a way back to camaraderie. However, too much joking or raucous energy can restimulate or minimize the situation. Diana will most likely need reassurance for a while that people still see her as a fully contributing member of the circle. She will need support not to turn her emotions into shame, and right now, she may just need a little space. The group members will need to reference this moment and to speak their individual lessons from it, but that will be done better after the energized weather settles a bit.

As host, Mike will resume hosting the conversation planned for the morning. Everyone will be present, and the work will go more smoothly. He will take a bit of extra time for check-out, knowing that the usual question, "What is the primary lesson you will take away from this session?" may elicit more profound reflections than usual.