



**The
Circle Way
for
Proactive
Aging**

Cynthia Trenshaw

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A Harvest of Years

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- [*Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture*](#) by Christina Baldwin
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- The lived experience of Cynthia Trenshaw

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“None of us can travel further by ourselves. Alone, our hearts become stony and guarded. Alone, we become frightened. But in gatherings of neighbors, sitting with a candle in the middle and an attitude of openness to the possibilities, we may become students of the circle.”

Christina Baldwin

Calling the Circle: the First and Future Culture

A Harvest of Years

Sometimes on a sleepless night or in a moment of daydreaming, certain questions begin to pester those of us past midlife:

These changes that I notice in my body – do they mean I am already old – or is there time to prepare for my aging?

Who will care about me when I am old?

What will happen when I can't care for myself?

Will I still have my mind? Please, God, let me still have my mind.

What if I actually do live to be 100?

Maybe in the middle of a conversation, unspoken yearnings slip out of their hiding places just long enough for us to wonder:

Who cares about who I have been, who I am now, and who I am becoming?

Who shares my interests? Who inspires me?

Who listens to my story, honors my history, and invites me into their story?

Now that my family is scattered/preoccupied/gone, who feels like “kin” to me?

How can I pass on the wisdom I've accumulated through my life's experiences?

In asking such questions, perhaps we yearn not so much for the answers, but for a way to explore these concerns out loud. Many of us long to be in a supportive, receptive conversation that holds and honors our deepest questions. I believe the opportunity we seek occurs when a group of people dares to switch from *socializing* to *dialogue* – what I call “circle talk.”

Circle is an intentional conversation, convened or “called” when someone puts out a question or topic and invites others to participate in exploring it. Circle space is hosted, focused, and gently structured; it is framed with a bit of ceremony to delineate between social time and more attentive speaking and listening. Our tender, vulnerable, important questions deserve to be explored in a space that encourages this kind of attention.

This choice for intentional conversation can seem to be a radical departure from what we usually experience at parties, after church, at work, or on TV. Someone who really longs to be with others in this different way of talking may wonder:

So often it feels as if there is no one I can talk to; am I the only one who yearns for conversations of substance?

Can I find just one other person who wants to talk about the things that I think about?

If I can find one other person, can we, together, find four more?

Without alienating old friends, family, or spouses can we, a courageous few, start conversations of genuine depth; can we create a circle of the heart?

Can I find a new community? Can I figure out how to start?

The answer can be “Yes!” to each of those questions. In the past many years, I have been part of a group of friends and neighbors who meet regularly to explore questions about aging,

personal values, and our futures. This booklet is the story of our group, and of the structure that makes this heartfelt conversation possible: The Circle Way.

How Our Circle Began

For a wide variety of reasons, many people in their late 50's and early 60's find themselves relocating. In 2001, despite fervent earlier vows that "I'll *never, ever* go through this agony again," I, too, packed up and moved. I arrived in a new community, needing to create a whole new infrastructure for my life. The familiar Midwest, where I had spent the first half-century of my life, seemed to be light-years away. Now, three moves and nine years since my husband's death, "friends" were people I hadn't known two years before, and "home" was a part of the country that hadn't entered my thoughts since grade school geography. Yet there I was, settling in the state of Washington, living on an *island* (of all things!) floating in Puget Sound, like a castaway on a huge green raft.

Beneath my new day-to-day life, like fish nibbling at the underside of my raft, dozens of uncomfortable questions about aging nagged at me. Then one day, after a leisurely lunch with two new friends, I risked saying some of the things that were on my mind. "Over the years," I said, "I have met so many elderly people who have no interests, no friends, no 'life.' I want to keep that from happening to me." Roger and Margaret listened, and responded with relief. They, too, wondered about growing old, about maintaining relationships through the process, about what kinds of support they might eventually want and need and whether that support would be available.

We discovered that all three of us were hungering to talk about issues we feared no one else wanted to listen to. We weren't interested in weather and gossip. We wanted to speak about our multiple losses and our big and small worries. We shared a growing suspicion that change is the only certainty, and that growth and learning will continue until our last breaths. We wanted to explore how our spiritualities had evolved in the midst of our unique life experiences and religious traditions.

Margaret poured another round of coffee, and we moved into the living room. We talked about our hard-won knowledge. Each of us had had long and varied careers. All three of us had reared children. We all had lived long enough to know that asking questions is more crucial than getting answers. But what do we do with all of this unclaimed treasure that is the sum of our lives? How, and with whom, could we deeply share our joys and burdens, our wonderings and wonderments – this harvest of our years? How could we find more companions of the heart to walk with us as we continued the journey toward the inevitable end of our lives? Who would want to hear, and remember for us, how we hoped to live our deaths? Where could we find a loyal community of support as we aged? Over our final sips of coffee, we admitted that it was unlikely that we would ever find such a community.

And then, in the silence that followed, all three of us seemed to "hatch" the same idea at the same time: *So if we can't **find** the community we want, maybe we can **create** it.*

It turned out that each of us was imagining the same sort of structure for gathering, because each of us had, at one time or another, learned and practiced The Circle Way. Perfect! Excitement quickly rose among us: *Let's do it!* We picked a date several weeks away and called or emailed five other people we thought would be interested in exploring the territories of aging

and spirit and support. I volunteered to be the host, and Roger and Margaret agreed to guide the first gathering.

It is now well over a decade since that pivotal afternoon lunch. None of us remembers exactly when the name “Circle of Caring” stuck to our group, but that’s what we call ourselves now. We are continuously amazed and bemused at how we came together, how we have grown, how deep our individual roots have sunk into the soil of our circle.

The Circle of Caring quickly grew. Over the years, some of our members moved away, some died, and some new members were invited to join. The membership usually hovers around fourteen men and women, couples, and singles.

We talk about living well and dying well, about joys and regrets, about dependence and independence. We have talked about euthanasia and healthcare. We have talked about change, letting go, and advocacy. We have helped each other write documents of advance directives and letters to families explaining our wishes. We are a community of laughter and tears and courageous honesty. We are learning what to do for each other when life gets difficult, when we need to celebrate, when illness strikes.

We’ve talked a lot about care giving and care receiving. Some of us have worked in medical settings, some of us are facing illnesses right now. This circle allows us to authentically explore the idea of aging in ways that had not been available to us before. Some of us attend churches; some of us don’t, but gradually we have shared with each other our various spiritual practices. We have pondered life after death, the concept of grace, and spiritual discernment. We have enough unused conversation topics to fill another year’s calendar of gatherings.

We have dreamed together about new forms of community, and how to preserve our wisdom. We have sung songs and created art, we have feasted (often!), we have sat in silence, and we have supported each other through crises. Dozens of other people have inquired about our circle, and we have helped new groups form their own circles. We are living in the community that we longed for. You can too!

A Quick Summary: How Do We Do This – and Who Does What?

Caller – the one who has the courage to start a circle, who ignites the initial enthusiasm, generates exploratory conversations, sees that the first gathering happens. This role quickly recedes as the circle takes on its own life.

Host – a different volunteer for each gathering, who sees to the hospitality and physical comforts of the group, perhaps offers the space in which to meet.

Facilitator – a different volunteer each gathering, who presents the topic, remains aware of the format of the gathering, keeps conversation flowing.

Guardian – a different volunteer for each gathering, who remains especially aware of group process and calls for pauses when needed.

Members of the circle – everyone on the rim of the circle shares responsibility with the host, the facilitator, and the guardian for the functioning, focus, and comfort of the circle.

After our first year, we realized we also wanted two additional roles that don’t rotate as often. These were our own additions, and your group may not feel the need for them:

Communicator – a volunteer who agrees to see that everyone is informed about upcoming gatherings and topics; our Circle of Caring often uses email for this purpose.

Archivist – a volunteer who maintains a scrapbook of the activities of the circle. Our archivist is actually two people: one organized scrapbook person and one compulsive note-taker who records the gist of conversations and “gems of wisdom.” Names are not attached to statements in these notes, to preserve confidentiality along with content.

Guide to Calling a Circle That Is Focused on Aging

The Caller

A circle is an egalitarian space where leadership rotates and responsibility is shared. To get to that point, however, someone needs to put out a call for the circle to come together. For simplicity, I’m going to assume that you are the **caller**. You will not need to host every meeting, yet you play a critical role in gathering an interesting and compatible group that can build the kind of community you want to create.

It may be a new experience to consider criteria for selecting people to join a group, but circle has the potential to build friendships with longtime commitments. So, who do you ask? Imagine sitting at a kitchen table, telling someone a very important story: Who would you want to be the one listening? The qualities of that listener are the qualities of a good circle member. Imagine that you are lying in a bed, sick with the flu: Who would you want sitting at your bedside, keeping your misery company? The qualities of that person are the qualities of a good circle member. Imagine a day at play – golfing, beachcombing, a game of Scrabble or bridge: Who inserts thought-provoking comments or quiet, unexpected questions into these ordinary routines? This person is also a good circle member.

You probably don’t want to invite someone who must always put their “two-cents’ worth” in, or who has all the answers, or who squirms at silence and needs to fill it with words, or who rushes to try to fix situations or people. Also, it may be a mistake to invite people solely because they seem lonely or because you feel you should. Invite people who can be introspective, who are willing to speak thoughtfully and deeply. You are looking for particular skills of being with other people in openhearted, open-minded ways.

Having considered these qualities, however, it’s also necessary to trust the energy of the circle itself. Strive for some diversity in the mix of people. The circle functions as a gathering of colleagues who each bring their own knowledge, insight and relationship to the purpose of the group. A circle should be small enough to allow full participation — six to twelve people seems to work best. When you use the structural guidelines described below, the ones who are meant to be in your circle will arrive and stay, and the ones who aren’t appropriate may drift away. Trust the laws of attraction and withdrawal as much as you can. Make a list of prospective members, and then talk with them. See if their eyes light up when you talk about forming a circle to explore conscious aging.

Qualities that mark a good prospective circle member:

- Ability to listen, comfortable with silence.
- Feels no need to advise or fix.
- Curiosity about almost everything.
- Ability to ask profound questions.
- Has a good sense of humor (but doesn’t use it as a distraction).

- Appreciation for the differences among people. Grounded in his or her own spirituality.
- Speaks honestly about self, feelings, and needs.

You've decided to begin

You have a date, you have a place, and you have invited a few people. Now what? It is important that the **gathering space** reflects your intention, which means you will have a welcoming space, with seating – of course – in a circle. Folks will be sitting in this circle for several hours, so be aware of bodily comforts: have water and non-alcoholic beverages available (our group loves snacks, too) to the side of the circle; let people know where the bathrooms are; have throw pillows available for additional seating support.

Pay particular attention to the **center** of the circle. The center of the circle is a focal point that reflects the nature and intention of the circle. On a low table, or on the floor, you might place a simple centerpiece, perhaps a plant, flowers, or a natural object. You may choose a book or a placard with an appropriate quote, a photo, or an art object. A candle is a universal symbol of reflective focus. It's surprising how soothing that little flame can be and how its presence works its way into the speech of the group.

Besides adding simple beauty, the center is used as a **neutral zone**. The stories and insights people share are spoken to the middle; our words become simple offerings. When words are “placed” in the center, people can think about what's said without having to take it into themselves. In this way, people in a circle can more easily express many different opinions and responses without all having to agree.

By holding a little beauty and light, the center provides a **focus point** for reflection, a place where people's eyes may rest. It becomes a symbol of the group's highest intent and reminds participants of their loyalty, of why they are present, and of the spirit-sourced values they bring to the circle.

Roles in Circle

The circle begins to take shape. It is important for the gathering to begin and end at the agreed-upon times. Our circle has agreed that those who want to socialize will come fifteen minutes early to chat, to enjoy our snacks and beverages, and be ready to begin on time. The host and/or facilitator for the evening welcomes the “early birds,” and then helps people settle in to circle as the starting time approaches.

So far we've learned about the role of the caller whose brilliant idea it was to call the circle in the first place, and whose enthusiasm has brought several people together for a gathering. Then there is the **host**, who prepares a space and hospitality for the gathering this time (next time someone else may do this). There are two other important positions in a circle, both of which are filled by different people each time the circle meets. There is a **facilitator** who guides the content and the flow of the gathering, and a **guardian** who attends to the group process. In truth, everyone has a part in both these roles, but at each gathering, two people volunteer to be especially attentive to these particular aspects and needs of the circle.

Opening the Circle

Arrival in circle indicates willingness to bring attention to the moment, to be both physically and mentally present. When everyone has arrived, attention turns to the **start-point**, usually offered by the **facilitator**. This may be:

- a moment of silence, *followed by*
- a reading (a poem, a quote, a question), *or*
- any brief focus activity that fits the nature of the group, *and*
- another moment of silence, to absorb what has been said or done

Checking in

After the start-point, which may take around five minutes, a circle usually proceeds to a **check-in** so that everyone has a chance to voice his or her presence. This is a brief but crucial part of the process, a time when community is built voice by voice. Members speak for a minute or two, letting the others know their status at this moment: what's most on their mind, how they are feeling emotionally or physically, or what personal news they are bringing to this circle.

One simple **check-in ritual** is to ask participants to bring an item that is special to them, something that represents what they bring to the group this time. (Let people know a few days ahead of time that they'll need such an item, and explain that they will be able to take it home.) Members each take turns briefly sharing a statement or a story about their item, why they chose it, and how it connects with the circle. Then they place the item in the center. Such a check-in might sound like these examples:

I brought a stone that I found this morning. It reminds me of the stones I used to collect as a kid. When I was young I was sure that some stones had secret codes in the markings on them, and I spent hours trying to decode them. I wanted so badly for Spirit to be communicating with me. That is still my deepest longing, to be connected with Spirit.

This is the ID band that I had to wear when I was in the hospital in December. That was the first time I really looked at my mortality, and I didn't like having to face it in a hospital setting. I'd like to talk about how we can help each other get the kind of care we want when something goes wrong with our health.

My daughter and her family are traveling in Arizona, and they sent this postcard. This is the kid who hated traveling when she was little – she got car sick all the time, had to pee every ten miles, and was a real pain on vacations. I just have to smile, thinking about how times change, and how she became a world traveler. Amazing.

I'm having a difficult time right now, and I'm worrying a lot, especially about an issue that is pretty personal. I have written about it on this piece of paper, and folded it up and taped it shut. I don't want to talk about it just yet, but I want you to know that I'm worried, and I want to place my concern into the center and ask you to hold it with me.

I have been in circles where, for months, I didn't even know a person's last name, yet through their check-ins I knew a whole lot about who they were at heart. Check-in is so important that sometimes, as often as once a month, we in our Circle of Caring give ourselves

the luxury of having no agenda except a long check-in, with each person taking up to ten minutes to say “This is how I am now” to a community of caring listeners.

Purpose and Focus

After check-in, the facilitator introduces the purpose and focus for the day’s gathering. Here is a list of questions that served as the focus for some of our circles:

- If I were to die tomorrow, what would I regret? What would I celebrate?
- Why do we resist depending on others?
- What is “change,” and why are we resistant to it?
- How shall we express our final wishes?
- What do we believe about life after death?
- What do I have to offer to someone in need of care?
- What is grace, how does it show up in my life?
- What personal stories about death/dying do we want to share?
- What activities make us feel younger, more vital? Why is this so?
- Why do kids think that we’re afraid of them?
- What makes communities work?
- How does purpose move through our lives?
- How do we listen for divine guidance?
- How can we advocate for each other in healthcare settings?
- What books, poems, movies have shaped us?
- What relational skills do we want to develop?

After the purpose and focus is stated, members of the circle turn their attention to what they need to do to support the topic of the meeting. The following guidelines can help smooth the way with interactions that enrich the intention and purpose of The Circle Way.

Basic Guidelines for Interactions in The Circle Way

By now, you have seen that the structure of The Circle Way is simple and adaptable. Our Circle of Caring has found that circle structure is also amazingly strong when we follow a few basic guidelines for interacting. The Circle Way consists of four agreements, three principles, and three practices. Developed by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, this structure nurtures a collaborative process in which each member safeguards the group’s interactions, sustains the circle’s intention, and contributes to the purpose of the gathering.

The Circle Way Agreements

Group agreements are crucial to circle, yet they are, and should be, simple. The Circle Way Agreements are modernized versions of long-held understandings of respect.

1. **Stories shared in circle are confidential.** *For a full range of insight, story, and feeling to emerge in circle, participants must be able to trust that what they say will go no further than the boundaries of the circle.*

Our circle has a corollary agreement that meeting contents may be shared with spouses who do not attend the meetings. We had unanimous consent to this, or it would not be in effect. Also, if at any given time someone invokes total confidentiality, we honor that request.

2. **We listen to each other with discernment, compassion, and curiosity.** *This is a practice in **attention**: listening to the fullness of story, report, and reaction while keeping an open mind. Whenever we feel inner judgment beginning to rise, we bring ourselves back to attention with an attitude of curiosity about the other person and about our own inner responses.*

I remember becoming impatient one night with a story that seemed to be a huge tangent from the topic of the meeting; I got restless and irritated with the speaker. Then I noticed the check-in item she had placed in the center — a picture of a whale — and I relaxed into thinking of her swimming slowly but purposefully through water. I smiled as her tangent returned to the topic, much richer for us all because she had gone the long way around.

3. **We ask for the support we need and offer what we can.** *This agreement creates a functioning group where people can count on each other. It is just as important to the group that members' needs be **spoken** as it is that those needs be **met**; otherwise a lot of guessing, unmet needs, and misapplied support will deplete the group's energy.*

At the end of one gathering, William spoke up. He said, "I don't know if you realize how important this was for me tonight. When Sue mentioned her mother's illness, I suddenly remembered my favorite uncle's dying, and unexpectedly I began to cry. Sue noticed, and became quiet. Everyone watched, 'holding' me with their attention, but no one handed me a tissue or patted me on the back. That was good— those actions would have said 'Stop crying, Will,' yet I needed to cry. Then, when I asked for a tissue, the box was passed to me, and after a while the conversation continued, not as if I hadn't cried, but as if my crying was now a part of the conversation. Thank you for letting that happen."

If someone is confused about the meaning of what has just been said; if someone is uncomfortable about the way certain words are being used; if someone has an urgent need to sing the phrase of a song that really fits the conversation, if someone needs to name what they're feeling, it is quite likely that speaking their need is exactly the gift that the circle needs at that moment.

4. **When the group is uncertain how to proceed, or in need of a resting point in group process, we will stop action and observe a pause for self-reflection and reliance on spirit.** *Just as we sometimes need to stop and take a deep breath, so a group sometimes needs to "breathe" too. A well-timed pause in group interaction is an important tool for bringing people back to focus and allowing the group's "mind" to clear. In *The Circle Way*, this pause is called for by a person who serves as the circle's "guardian."*

The guardian is a person who volunteers to attend to and safeguard group process. A different person fulfills this role each time the circle meets. While serving as guardians, people do their best to be exquisitely aware of how group process is functioning. The guardian has the circle's permission to intercede with an agreed-upon signal to call for a pause in the action. (The

conversation may have become heated or gone off on someone's personal agenda; the facilitator may be struggling to respond to questions; someone may not be aware that they have rambled on and lost group attention; or people may simply need a stretch break.)

Each person agrees to drop into silence with the guardian's signal. The guardian's signal may be a small brass bell, chime, rattle, or any object that makes a pleasant sound loud enough to be heard during conversations. During silence, each person takes a few deep breaths and re-centers. The "Practice of Three Breaths" is a helpful tool to employ in this silence: *One breath to let go of extraneous thoughts, one breath to return to the moment, one breath to ask: Now what?*

The guardian holds the silence for anywhere from 15 seconds to a minute, depending on the situation. When the group is refocused, the guardian releases the silence by making the signal again and then explaining the reason for having called the pause. Then the group, having tended to its needs, continues its interaction.

The Three Principles of Circle

The Circle Way is based on three simple but critically important principles:

- Leadership is rotating
- Responsibility is shared
- Reliance is on the spirit of the group

Leadership is rotating

Whoever has volunteered to be the current meeting's **facilitator** becomes the current guide for the circle's interactions. Even so, no one is in charge. The facilitator can serve the circle in the following (and perhaps other) ways by:

- Gathering needed materials, seeing that there is a focus symbol in the center, asking for a volunteer guardian.
- Offering the start-point and providing the pause that invites members to shift from socializing to attentiveness.
- Introducing and helping oversee movement through the meeting's topic or intention.
- Assisting group process by supporting the guardian.
- Making closing remarks to summarize the gathering, seeing that the group knows when and where the next meeting will be, who will facilitate (if known), and (if known) what the topic will be.
- Leading the group in a brief *conclusion* of the gathering

Throughout the meeting, the facilitator watches over the intention of the circle and sees that the Three Practices of Circle are embodied. In the next gathering, someone else will assume this role.

When the Circle of Caring first began, some participants were reluctant to facilitate, unsure of "how to do it right." After a few months, and a growing enthusiasm for upcoming topics, increasing group trust allowed formerly reluctant people to take their turn at rotating leadership.

Responsibility is shared

Each member of a circle has an equal, and always unique, responsibility for the success of the gathering. Each person is equally responsible for embodying the ways of being in circle that are invoked in the Three Practices of Circle.

Reliance is on the spirit of the group

The “spirit of the group” is its combined energy, its common purpose, its highest goals. The “spirit” is the intention that motivates the group. The center of the circle is the focal point for that spirit. During times of silence, or whenever refocusing is needed, group members can “return to center” to remind themselves of all that is “held” there.

The Three Practices of Circle

Three skills govern what members offer their circle and how each person receives what the group offers back. These practices are the ways people embody the group’s agreements. Once again, the list is short, simple, and crucial to the health and wellbeing of the people of the circle, as well as of the circle itself. The practices are:

- Listen with attention
- Speak with intention
- Contribute to the wellbeing of the group

Listen with attention

Focus clearly on what is being said by someone else. If you are tense, or thinking about what you are going to say next, or arguing with the speaker in your mind, or have your mind made up about the value of what the person is saying, you are probably not listening with attention. If you are curious about what is being said, wondering how the speaker feels, and interested to notice your own response to their words, you are probably listening with attention. Listening may become a spiritual practice in which we receive each other’s stories and insights. There is a sense of satisfaction to listening well and being heard.

Speak with intention

Contribute stories, thoughts, and information that have relevance to the situation in the moment. Intentional speaking requires being patient until we understand what to contribute and how to speak our truth without blame or judgment.

Contribute to the wellbeing of the group

Consider the impact of your words and actions before, during, and after interactions. If you feel some residual confusion about your words or actions, or those of others, learn to ask for clarification rather than making assumptions or carrying around discomfort that may be a matter of misunderstanding.

Maintaining Clear Intention

About twice a year, something seems to happen in our circle, usually when a conversation has gone off into planning a gathering or a project. “But wait a minute,” someone will say, “is that what we’re supposed to be about? What are we really doing here?” And so we return to thinking about what our intention is, and what is the central guidance point around which we gather.

If a circle’s intention is no longer remembered, referenced, or used as a point of common agreement, it is easy to lose access to the collective intelligence. If a few people hold on to the original intention (and assume others are doing so as well) while other members move off in new directions (and assume that everyone is on board), and still others are uncertain what’s happening (but assume that everyone else knows), then a formerly well-intentioned group can descend into unwanted struggles. A circle without intention lives in a murky environment.

Over time, group intention needs to be made clear again and again. Conversations that re-clarify intention often occur at the end of the first meeting, and periodically thereafter when you’re wanting to understand what the heck you’re all doing sitting in this circle anyway.

You originally “called” the circle by offering people a clear intention to respond to. Now, each member can help articulate a shared intention that represents the interest and excitement of those who gathered around that call. As a circle forms around the questions of aging, your intention may be one or more of the following:

- to create a community that will emotionally support each other through the aging and dying processes
- to share conversation that include spiritual, political, and emotional concerns
- to accumulate, over time, an understanding of the core values and histories of each member, to be held and honored through their aging process
- to discuss books, articles, current information on aging, illness, dying, and community
- to create a community that will learn the skills of caregiving so that when one member needs care, some members will be able to provide some of that care
- to share deep thoughts, raucous fun, good food, compassionate tears, and warm touch, recognizing these needs in each other as in ourselves

These examples of overall intention shape the focus, direction, and expectations in slightly different ways. Of course, with group consensus, intention can evolve. It is good to revisit the question of group intention on a regular, at least annual, basis. It is very wise to *plan* for this conversation (do it intentionally!), not counting on it to happen spontaneously. If you don’t, the need will inevitably occur in the last ten minutes of a meeting, when there is no time for the depth of discussion that is needed.

A Note About Longevity

Our Circle of Caring started out intending to meet for eight sessions; now, well over a decade later, we can’t imagine stopping. However, it will end one day. It is important to address that reality from time to time: Along with, “Why are we meeting?” we need to ask, “Shall we continue to meet for this purpose?”

Our circle knows of proactive aging groups that have been together for twenty and thirty years, but they didn't start out with that longevity in mind; nor has the makeup of these groups remained constant. You can give your circle an opportunity to reconstitute, or even disband gracefully, by scheduling an evaluation and assessment point six or eight meetings down the road. If people know this is built into your circle plans, prospective members will be more likely to attend with their curiosity and their presence. If you regularly refresh your circle's intention, members will have opportunities to bow out without guilt or recrimination if they find the intention no longer matches their interests or their schedules.

Three Forms of Circle

Different forms of circle accomplish different objectives. We have used all three of the following, and some variations on these forms as well:

- Conversation Circle
- Talking-Piece Circle
- Silent Circle

Conversation Circle is a common, open, informal way of meeting. The energy of open conversation stimulates the free flow of ideas. Such conversation can, however, overwhelm those who aren't comfortable leaping into the verbal fray. There are times when conversation is essential to the group process, and times when the process will work better if talk is slowed down a bit, allowing a calmer pace and more contemplation. Conversation Circle and Talking-Piece Circle are often alternated. Conversation Circle differs from the open conversation you might have at a party or in a restaurant where there is no agreed-upon structure. In Conversation Circle, ideas and stories are exchanged in a consciously-held "container" (the circle) with agreements, principles, practices, and intention in place.

Our circle primarily uses the **Talking-Piece Circle**. This form tends to slow the pace of the meeting, encouraging deliberate speaking and listening, and gathering in all points of view, information, and insight. In this form, an object – a rock, a small stick, a set of car keys – is passed from person to person. Only the person holding the talking-piece may speak. There is no "cross-talk," no responses to or comments on what is being said. People may pass if they do not wish to speak. Using a talking-piece is an ancient, multi-cultural form of circle. Check-in and check-out are variations of Talking-Piece Circle.

The Role of the Talking Piece

In our experience, the talking piece can do more than just keep order in circle. It can also provide a contact point through which members can access their own wisdom. When the talking piece comes to you, or you pick it up from the center you might "consult it" in the following ways:

If you have been busy preparing a brilliant speech, hold the talking piece silently for a moment and then:

- see how much of your planned offering really contributes to the circle in this moment. Whatever still wants to be said, say it.

- see if there might be something entirely different, even surprising, that rises up to be said instead.
- see if what you want to say needs to “ferment” a little longer, and if, perhaps, a bit of silence, and then passing the talking piece, is the most profound “statement” you can offer right now.

If, when the talking piece comes to you, you think you have nothing to say, hold the talking piece in silence for a moment and then:

- if there is truly nothing for you to say, pass.
- if there is something that wants to emerge, then speak, however haltingly, and the words will be true.

Silent Circle is a seldom-used form of meeting, especially in Western culture. But in The Circle Way, where the group’s intention (the center) is called upon to inform the group’s direction, even a few seconds of silence, and focus on center, can change the course of the meeting. *Three Breaths* (see above) is a helpful tool to employ in silence, but any tool of personal reflection will do. Any silence that helps individuals maintain focus on center and on their own centeredness, activates the third Principle — *reliance on the spirit of the group*.

Checking out

It should be clear by now that a circle focused on conscious aging is not the average “senior get-together.” The Circle Way structure, principles, practices, and forms create a different climate for gathering. Because the meeting itself has been held intentionally, it needs to be closed intentionally. Doing so “seals the container” of the circle until your next gathering. Our circle usually uses a check-out that allows us to speak briefly in closure, to remove whatever object we may have contributed to the center, and perhaps to summarize what we have gained from being present.

Examples of check-out might be:

“I’m grateful for being in this circle today. It always surprises me, how we can talk about the important things, and how much I carry away with me to think about through the week.”

“I confess that I thought today’s topic sounded corny. But then I really got caught up in it. I’ll be thinking for a long time on what we’ve talked about.”

“I think maybe now, after today, I will have the courage to speak to my friend who is dying, and to tell her how much she means to me, and how much I’ll miss her. I will be counting on all of you to be thinking of me, so I don’t chicken out.”

“While we’ve been talking today, I’ve been so energized. There are about six different topics that I want to bring up for future meetings. And I’ll even facilitate at least one of them! Thanks so much for all that you – that we – do in this circle. I wouldn’t miss this for anything!”

If there is only a short amount of time left for check-out (and you *do* want to honor the group’s time commitment), members may, in turn, speak into the center just one word or phrase that summarizes the meeting’s experience for them.

The facilitator may then offer an **end-point**, a brief ritual (standing in silence, singing a song, blowing out the candle in unison) to bring closure to the circle and release everyone back to social space. There! You've *done* it. You've met in The Circle Way with a focus on conscious aging.

Congratulations!

So, Where to from Here?

Last night, our Circle of Caring met again. The kitchen table at Helen and Burt's house overflowed with the bounty of summer gardens. At 7 PM, we pulled ourselves away from the food (or carried some with us) and gathered in the living room. Carolyn invited a *brief* check-in (we've learned, as facilitators, to be specific about this, or the richness of the check-in round will carry us all the way to the check-out round!). Then she presented our topic for the evening: Creating new and vital communities for the second half of life.

This time we, used a Conversation Circle form. We talked about how what we want hasn't yet been done, so far as we know. The "retirement community" isn't what we want, and we certainly don't want the nursing home model. Someone said that "desire is the direction-finder – so what do we yearn for?" What would the Circle of Caring look like if it were truly a community, not just a twice-a month gathering? Are we each willing to give up some of our individuality to have community? We must be together face-to-face, and often, in order to build up the skills to become community. How do we design what we want? Are we talking about getting into a bricks-and mortar project? Or can we do the more difficult thing of creating a "virtual community," committed to each other and to meeting our needs, not letting our intention wane, yet not getting caught up in thinking that community-building means architectural blueprints and contractors?

And then it dawned on us, much like the "hatching" effect of the conversation many years before that led to the creation of our circle: We are already well into the process of creating the community we want to be in! Through our gatherings in circle, we have already begun what we wanted to begin. We have a long way to go, and our next several meetings will focus on discovering exactly what we do yearn for, and how we can support each other in meeting those needs. What experiences need to happen, what skills do we need to develop to become more deeply connected? We closed our meeting with excitement about the creativity being called forth from us, as well as joy in our accomplishments. Animated conversations continued long after the center candle was doused, and by the time we each left for our various homes, all our snacks had been devoured.

The format that you have learned in the previous pages is how our Circle of Caring plans to continue gathering. This is how we will follow our yearnings. This is the beginning of community. This is The Circle Way.

A Note on the Circle's Influence Beyond Your Group

The Circle Way is holographic, in that using even a part of the structure invokes the wholeness of circle in many people's minds. The ability to shift from competitive to cooperative interaction and deep listening is the litmus test of circle's presence. After you've learned the basics of this structure, it's not so important to adhere to it as you would to Robert's Rules of

Order. What matters is that the attitude of respect and collaboration is present in those who gather. One or two or three participants holding this attitude in mind can bring elements of circle to a variety of gatherings. Many times check-in is enough to set the tone for more thoughtful listening, no matter who is gathered. For example:

At the local coffee shop, the conversation is getting animated, and it's hard to know who is saying what. Harry grabs a teaspoon and says, "Wait, slow down, this is good stuff. I want to hear it all. What if we each take turns speaking? Mary, as long as you hold this spoon you have the floor, and we'll all listen. Go for it, and when you're done, pass it to whoever asks next."

Or

In the parking lot at the local grocery store, conversation centers around the bookstore owner and some relationship difficulties she's having. Susan decides to move the conversation from "gossip" to "council" by saying, "Could we observe three agreements about this conversation? One, that we don't take stories beyond this gathering. Two, that we focus on what might be helpful to Joan. Three, that we use these keys as a talking piece, so only one person speaks at a time, and we have time to digest what is being said."

Or

In a nursing home, half a dozen residents are sitting at a table in the recreation room. They don't often get a chance to talk about what really matters to them, so Stephen, whose mother is one of those at the table, says, "I'm wondering, what's the best thing or the worst thing that happened to you this week?" (The responses are a check-in round.) And then, picking up on a theme that he hears among the speakers, he says, "It's odd that we can all be lonely, and yet need more privacy, both at the same time. When are some times in your life that you have had all the privacy you've needed?" (That question states the "intention" of this conversation.) When each person has had a chance to speak again, Stephen affirms the importance of sharing stories, just as this group has done, and he walks around the table, briefly touching each person and saying, "Thank you for your story." (That's a closure.)

Perhaps it was divine intention that brought me to this green raft of an island floating in Puget Sound; certainly many of my prayers were answered when the Circle of Caring emerged in my life. Now I know who shares my interests, who inspires me, who listens to my story, who honors my history and invites me into their story – it is those with whom I share the rich circle that embraces our "harvest of years." I am profoundly grateful to each one in the Circle of Caring and to all the others — perhaps, now, you as well — who carry the gift of circle-making into our world.

Post Script: How the Circle of Caring Supported the Dying Process of its Members

For all our years of meetings focused on aging, dying, and death, the Circle of Caring found that we had no idea how best to be with members as they actually died! Some of us had

experienced deaths in our own families; some of us had even taken bedside caregiving courses. Still, though, we somehow felt helpless as “one of us” was dying.

But we learned. Each time one or more of us attended beloved members who were making their final journey, we learned.

One of the most important things we learned from being in circle together, and living the Agreements, was to look honestly at what we *could* offer to one who was ill or dying. And what we could *not* offer. There were no *shoulds*, no *oughts*, no expectations. This has become what we now think of as our lasting circle legacy – the ability to ask for what we need and offer what we can with no (well, hardly any) discomfort about either. It is a gift to ask; it is a gift to offer; it is a gift to receive.

Six of us have died since Roger, Margaret, and I called that very first meeting of the Circle of Caring – including both Roger and Margaret.

In attending each of those deaths, as best as each of us could, some of us learned to become “deathing midwives,” who would later be called to the bedsides of other circle members. Through our ongoing circle sharing, we could be comfortable that these “midwives” would honor our wishes as we died.

In confronting our own mortality in the “mirrors” of each of these six deaths, we became a little more comfortable with the idea that our own deaths were approaching. Within the safety and the holding of circle, we could continue to practice the deep listening that is needed, especially in the dying of one who has grown to be a friend.

The six circle members who shared their dying with us were Peter, Ellen, Mark, Roger, Margaret, and Bernie. These are the learnings each of them gave us:

Peter

Never fully invested in the Circle of Caring, and attending only occasionally, Peter belonged to other groups that he found more nourishing, such as his Buddhist circle. That group offered the prayers and hands-on care that he sought as he was dying. His wife, Gretchen, continued to be supported by the Circle of Caring; she could talk about how hard it was. She let us know immediately after he had died at home. Some of us went there to honor Peter’s life as his body lay in the window seat overlooking his beloved garden, among his family and Buddhist friends. The plain reality of Peter’s death made our circle conversations about death far more real after that, far less theoretical than they might previously have been.

Ellen

Five years later, we’d had time to reconsider the realities we discussed, including the realities of Ellen’s cancer and multiple chemotherapies and other treatments. She shared with us how difficult it was, while also showing us how rich the experience could be. In the late stages of her disease, when she had to decide whether or not to accept very expensive IV artificial nutrition, she called several members of the Circle of Caring to her hospital bedside to help her “think out loud” about the decision. Over the years, she had expressed her wishes about dying, as we all did, and she had seen to it that what she wanted was included in her advance directives. But the reality of the present was different from the reality she had imagined then, and she needed to think it through again in the nonjudgmental space of a listening circle.

When her death was imminent, Ellen asked to return home from the hospital to bring her relationships with friends and family to a close. One person at a time, she demonstrated how to have “no unfinished business,” as the circle had discussed so many times. She died at home, in her living room overlooking Puget Sound. Circle members kept vigil with her body, as she wished, for three days after she took her last breath. Then, we put her body in the cardboard coffin she had specified. We processed outside with her to the waiting van, and sang her out of the driveway and away to the crematorium.

Mark

Mark learned that he could still be comfortable in circle, even with his newly-diagnosed Parkinson’s disease. He didn’t need to try to hide or excuse his awkward “freezing” episodes. Nor did he have to disguise the fact that he didn’t have (or need) religious certainties about dying, even though he had been ordained a priest many years before. Circle was a safe place to explore his fears about the process and the progress of the disease and about how incapacitated he would most likely become.

Mark was hospitalized for something unrelated to Parkinson’s, and in the daunting world of medical institutions, was empowered to make his own decisions, with the support of Effie, his wife. As we had learned together in circle, having a medical advocate was essential in any medical situation, and Mark had completed his durable powers of attorney for healthcare, naming Effie as his primary advocate. What we hadn’t anticipated in circle, but now gratefully learned, was that the role of medical advocate was welcomed and appreciated by the medical establishment – they actually thanked Mark and Effie for making their work easier.

One exercise we learned and discussed in circle years before, was the saying of “The Five Important Words,” which were: *Please forgive me. I forgive you. I love you. Thank you. Goodbye.* Courageously, Mark and Effie asked the hospital staff for privacy, and in between Mark’s naps and necessary medical procedures, they reflected on each of the five phrases and how they applied to both of them in his last months. It was done with tears and smiles, honesty, and the tenderest of love, bringing their long, rich marriage to a close.

Later, Effie would tell the circle that through it all, they had a strong sense of being held by the circle, and by the Spirit in the center of the circle.

Roger

One of the options for prostate cancer is “watchful waiting” and that is what Roger chose. He was intentional in facing his diagnosis and could talk about it in circle. He did quite well for several years and lived comfortably; then, he died rather quickly from something other than the cancer. It was “supposed” to have been Margaret who died first, from a rare cancer that had been diagnosed much earlier than Roger’s. He loved her dearly, and he was also pragmatic. He was already thinking about how he’d liquidate his property and what his life would look like after she was gone. He could talk about this in circle, to see what his plans sounded like out loud – even with Margaret in the circle. The Spirit of the circle’s center was strong enough to hold all of it.

In his years of caring for Margaret, Roger was able to give her his great optimistic love, and in his dying weeks, he could finally welcome the nonjudgmental love that he had sought all his life. All the members of the circle attended him and lavished him with that love. He was buried

in the cardboard coffin that Margaret had purchased for herself; their grandchildren decorated it in felt pen art. Some circle members helped to prepare Roger's body for burial, guided by a compassionate funeral director experienced in home funerals. Though the circle had considered green burials among the several options for disposal of a body, Roger was the first of our members to choose it – now we could see what this option looked like in real life (or real death, in this case).

Margaret

Margaret was frequently in pain and almost always cheerful. At circle meetings, she often had to stand to be comfortable. She had all her plans made. She knew how she wanted people to be with her as she was dying; she had purchased her shroud and her cardboard coffin. She was sure she would die before Roger; she had been sure she would die at least three years before she finally did. But with the loving caregiving of a son and daughter-in-law, she thrived and outlived her prognosis.

Partly because the circle had been such a safe place to talk freely about death, Margaret did not fear dying. After Roger's death, Margaret chose to move away to live with the children who had cared for both of them. By email and phone, the circle continued to stay in touch with her, and she said she still felt held within the circle. She said it made her dying easier.

In the end, she was brought back to our community for green burial beside Roger.

Bernie

What we learned best from Bernie was to let him be Bernie.

If he fell asleep during our meetings, that was fine. If he lived with the assumption that everything *would* be done that *could* be done to keep him alive (though those might not have been our personal choices), we supported him. Bernie was very experienced with hospitalizations. He'd had dozens of them himself and had supported Ellen, his wife, through her years of medical treatments. Six months before his death, he finally told visiting circle members, "This is my last hospitalization," and we could support him in that as well. He had his pacemaker and defibrillator disconnected. Five months after that, he deliberately stopped taking his many medications.

Bernie was the one of us who could most easily ask for what he wanted. He did a lot of inner work in his last months and shared that with some members. When he was actively dying some of the circle chose to be present with him, even around the clock, augmenting his paid caregivers. One of those who attended him was a new member, and this was his first experience of being with a dying person. Afterward, he said, "I can't tell you what a gift that was – I could feel my fears around death melting away."

And then, those circle members who chose to, prepared Bernie's body, just as some had prepared Ellen's body, and sang him away from his home on his final journey.

Origins of The Circle Way

Circle process is often referred to as the foundational pattern supporting emerging forms of dialogue. In our need to remember and reattach to this quality of listening and speaking and collaborative action, several modern lineages of circle practice are being carried at this time, as well as the indigenous heritage that has survived around the world.

There are particular gifts associated with practicing The Circle Way that make it adaptable and successful in organizational settings. These contributions include: The Components Wheel, the Three Points of Leadership (especially the use of a group guardian), the articulation of principles and practices, and the four agreements.

In the history of this work, Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea coined the word “PeerSpirit” as the name of their educational company and the original name of their circle methodology. In 2010, with the publication of their book, *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*, the movement expanded globally and was rebranded as The Circle Way.

About this booklet

A Harvest of Years is the fourth booklet in an ongoing series that introduces specific applications and aspects of The Circle Way methodology. We are delighted to see this work adapted and applied in so many arenas and to support Cynthia Trenshaw’s work with issues of aging and the quality of end-of-life issues.

This particular booklet is written to help people use circle process in creating the environment for sustaining conversations about proactive aging. The complete vision and model of The Circle Way is presented in the books, *Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture*, and *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*.

You’ll find additional stories about this circle in Chapter 12 of *The Circle Way*.

About the author



Cynthia Trenshaw, MTh

Cynthia serves the superior courts of three Washington counties as a guardian ad litem in adult guardianships. She coaches elders in writing their advance directives and is a registered nursing assistant who attends those at the end of life.

Before moving to the Pacific Northwest, Cynthia was a massage practitioner among homeless people on the streets of San Francisco and an instructor for the Care Through Touch Institute there. For several years, she was chaplain of a 200-bed nursing home in Grand Rapids Michigan.

Cynthia received her bachelor's degree from Aquinas College in 1992, just before she turned 50, and earned her master of theological studies degree from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkley six years later.

Cynthia was widowed after 33 years of marriage and has four grandchildren on two continents. Her first book, *Meeting in the Margins: An Invitation to Encounter Society's Invisible People* was published by SheWrites Press in 2016. Her articles and poetry about the “hidden teachers” who inhabit the margins of our culture are published regularly in magazines and literary journals. She posts monthly blogs from her website, CynthiaTrenshaw.com and is a teaching colleague of The Circle Way, specializing in issues of aging.

Author photo by Chris Mann

More information

The Circle Way is a movement dedicated to re-introducing and supporting the use of council or circle in western culture. We believe that by rotating leadership, sharing responsibility, and attending to the spirit of shared intention, small groups of ordinary people can align themselves with social awareness, spiritual values, and responsiveness to the pressing needs of the earth, its people, and its creatures.

Facilitators, trainers and colleagues offer a variety of seminars and consulting services in The Circle Way. For more information about these services, or to contact us, visit our website at TheCircleWay.Net.