The background of the slide is a photograph of green leaves, some of which are brightly lit from behind, creating a glowing effect. A semi-transparent white rectangular box with a thin black border is centered on the slide, containing the title and authors' names.

Understanding Shadow and Projection in Circles and Groups

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*Wherever there is light, there is also shadow.
Like leaves filtering the summer sun, we experience
both in our relationships and in ourselves.*

What Is Shadow?

The term “shadow” originated with the visionary work of Swiss psychiatrists Carl Gustav Jung and Marie Louise von Franz, who used the word to refer to “the parts of ourselves that we are unable to know.”

Jung and von Franz theorized that every person develops both a known and an unknown self. This concept intrigued pioneers in the development of psychology and has recently spread into more common usage and acceptance. In the 1980s, author Robert Bly began exploring the origins of shadow¹ as a split between what he called our original radiance and our beliefs that only conformity guaranteed survival or acceptance. Bly suggests that each child is born a “living globe of radiant energy.”

It’s safe to say that few of us are able to hold onto the fullness of our inborn light or radiance for very long once we enter the realities of the family, the community, the society, and the world into which we have come. Most of us receive messages soon after our arrival that some parts of ourselves are not acceptable, are not welcomed, are not celebrated, are too much (or too little) for our primary caregivers, upon whose love and goodwill we are dependent for our survival. Some messages are verbal and issued directly at us. Some develop as we sense exhaustion or exasperation from our caregivers. Some are formed as mothers and fathers fail to make the sustained connection with an infant or child that assures that child that he or she is valued and loved. Some develop as we grow up in a world that includes some people and excludes others. Almost all of us receive these messages some of the time, and some people receive little else.

Recognizing that certain parts of our true nature are not acceptable to those we care about most, we do the only thing we know how to do: we place those unloved, devalued parts of ourselves into the backgrounds of our psyches and forget that they exist. At the same time, we create new facets of our personalities that seem to be more acceptable to

others. We place these in the personality foreground, hoping to win the love and approval the true self was unable to get. After a time, we come to believe that the foreground parts of our personalities represent all of who we really are. They do not. These are parts of a carefully constructed mask or a persona. The persona self may make it easier for us to get around in the world, but it’s not entirely authentic. The persona is based on the ego’s need for belonging.

We do need to belong. We are communal beings. As anyone who raises or works with children knows, it is a delicate and imperfect process to support the formation of unique or individual personalities and also impart to children a necessary social conditioning. Some of that original radiance is simply not functional in an adult. Adults acting out infantile rage are a danger to themselves and others, and they don’t bear much resemblance to Bly’s vision of “original radiance.” It’s an important and affirming part of being human to learn the customs, taboos, permissions and rules of the various societies in which we live. We must develop confidence in social situations so that we understand how to take our place, how to interact with others, and what to contribute and receive.

Bly calls the place in our psyches where we hide the unaccepted and unacknowledged parts of ourselves “the long bag we drag behind us.” As more and more parts of us are assigned to the background, they accumulate in this “long bag” and form what we have come to call the shadow: made up of all our surrendered, lost, shamed, banished, scolded, forbidden, unclaimed parts.

Thinking about the presence of a “shadow self,” many people conclude that the only aspects that go into that bag are “bad” or “negative” qualities. This is not true. Many of our “long bags” are filled to overflowing with wonderful, delightful, bold, courageous aspects of ourselves which simply had no way to be expressed in the families, schools, religious traditions, or communities in which we grew up. A little boy sent home from school with a note from the music teacher saying “this child is tone deaf,” may never try to sing again. Then at age fifty-five, holding his first grandchild, he croons a long forgotten lullaby and discovers he can carry a tune.

Because we in western dominant culture do not effectively understand or compassionately deal with

shadow, we may find ourselves in situations where lost parts of ourselves bleed through the persona we have so carefully (and usually unconsciously) crafted. We burst unexpectedly into tears or laughter. We suddenly exhibit a rage that overwhelms us or is disproportionate to a situation. We fall into unexplained despair or depression. We act out in ways that are the opposite of our consciously held values: begin an affair, buy an expensive sports car, walk out of a job.

Some of us simply reach a point where we admit that something in our lives is no longer working and we have lost a sense of who we really are. We can continue to ignore what we have just discovered about ourselves, or we can begin to explore the long bag we have been dragging behind us. We reclaim our wholeness by making a commitment to increase our own consciousness about all of who we are. A little girl always valued for her sweet temperament may wake up at forty-five furious at all the times she denied her anger. She is not likely to know what to do with this burst of emotion. She needs feedback, “anger lessons,” and hopefully a circle around her that will engage in courageous dialogue. As she moves through her confusion and learns how to wield anger as a conscious emotion, she becomes able to use anger in life-affirming ways. Shadow work is a difficult, but ultimately satisfying reclamation.

In much of the theory about shadow, mid-life is often seen as the time when the persona “breaks up” and the authentic self re-emerges. It’s also a time when many of us have assumed leadership in businesses, churches, communities, and in our family lives. We find ourselves involved in experiences that stretch and expand us. It’s probably a good idea to enter this expansive period of our lives expecting that our own and other people’s shadow material will come with us into any group or community in which we participate. And we should expect shadow material to present us with many chances to learn how to help each other grow and change.

Why Talk About Shadow?

Most people don’t enter a group thinking about the presence of shadow. We may be anxious, but most of us approach a new group experience hoping

that our expectations can be fulfilled, that we can participate in the life of the group in a spirit of cooperation and camaraderie, and that we’ll be respected, acknowledged, and even loved by others for who we are.

However, if we fail to acknowledge the presence of shadow—the unspoken, unconscious energies that reside in each individual and inside every group—we run the risk of repeating a common scenario of disappointment. Time after time, a group of good people come together with the best of intentions and with dedication to accomplish a good thing. We are socially considerate of each other. We seek common ground and shared assumptions that we will create a solid foundation of interpersonal stability among us. In this spirit, we begin whatever task or purpose the group has gathered to fulfill.

But, in our eagerness to belong, we may conform to unspoken group norms. In our desire to participate in leadership, we may dominate the life of the group without even being aware that we are doing so. As these unconscious and unspoken group patterns get set in place, one or two people may seem to commandeer more of the group’s time and attention, while other people begin to withhold their presence and contributions.

Irritations between members of the group may be smoothed over with empty pleasantries. Some members quietly withdraw and take back the hope that this experience will nurture them or help them to accomplish their goals. Anyone with group experience has seen these dynamics in action, and most of us don’t know how to manage such interpersonal inequities appropriately. It may take time before we even notice they’re occurring.

As teachers and circle co-facilitators, we noticed these troubling dynamics in circles or groups that we were leading, and sometimes in groups in which we participated as members. We went through a time when we thought the problem was that we had, once again, found ourselves in a flawed group: that if only everyone in the group shared a similar level of maturity, compatibility, or intention, these issues would either not occur or would just fade away. Over time, with more experience in studying groups that had a high degree of shared leadership and responsibility, we have come to understand that shadow is always present in both individuals and groups. We believe that, by creating a safe

environment, the circle beckons us to be more fully ourselves and to be more authentic with each other.

This often means that what is unhealed in individuals and in the group itself will come to light for healing. What we need in circle is a way to bring this drive for healing into the group's awareness and conversation.

When people cannot talk about the presence of shadow in the life of a group, they will act it out instead. In our roles as group participants, we may get angry or attempt to exert control over the group to make others behave. We may give up and drift off, show up less and less often, or start looking for a better group situation. We identify and talk with others about a "problem person" in the group. Though we often feel uncomfortable about such behind-the-scenes behaviors, we don't know what else to do. People in groups where shadow remains unacknowledged, or where shadow has been driven underground, frequently polarize between members who seem oblivious to what is happening to group cohesiveness and members who, intensely aware of the loss of cohesion, try to manage other people's behavior or re-direct group action without looking at their own participation in what is going awry.ⁱⁱ

Addressing what needs healing may not sound like the stated agenda of a circle or group that you're currently in, but just because no one talks about it doesn't mean healing isn't needed, isn't happening, or that the shadow isn't arising. That is the point of this booklet: there are unspoken elements of circle that need to be discussed and tended to, or they have the potential to erode or destroy our best intentions.

Attending to shadow is not always dramatic. Shadow-tending can be a quiet, meticulous project shared by all members of a group. A circle that is consistently tending to shadow and projection functions much like a household where all members pick up after themselves: the house seldom seems cluttered or dirty, yet no one person is consigned to the tedium of cleaning up after the others.

The emergence of shadow and projection in a circle is not a failure of the circle. Rather, it is an invitation for the group members to co-create a learning process that benefits and informs each individual member of a group as well as the whole. The benefit of attending to shadow in a group is that we all get to be more wholly who we are. We gain confidence in our ability to move through difficult

issues and still maintain the group's cohesiveness and good intention. A group of people who clean their psychic closets and polish their relational foundation is an amazing force for success. The inclusion of shadow and the willingness to deal with projection becomes a reason to celebrate a well-functioning group.

What Is Projection?

Shadow shows up through the act of projection. When we fail to do the meticulous work of reclaiming the material in our own shadows, we are likely to engage in *projecting* that material onto others. Projection is a psychological phenomenon through which we cast an unclaimed (positive or negative) personal aspect of ourselves out onto another person (or group of people). We then love or hate that quality or behavior in the other without realizing that this quality, this behavior we like or dislike in another, also lives in us.

In circumstances where we project *positive shadow material* onto others, we may make another person larger-than-life and deny that person her humanness and authenticity. ("You're so important to this group, and I'm just the newcomer.") We may exaggerate the qualities of another person seeing how we want him to be rather than experiencing him as the person he actually is. ("John is a pillar of strength. He never gets discouraged.") In the process of projecting, we lose the complex truth about one another. And of course, once someone is on projection's pedestal, it's only a matter of time until they fall and are punished for being exactly like we are: flawed and imperfect.

In the case of negative projection of shadow, we refuse to acknowledge in ourselves the very thing we are unable to tolerate in others. ("Jody is so judgmental. I just can't stand how she labels people!") Jody actually may be judgmental, but so is the speaker. By projecting this disowned quality onto another person, we manage to keep the more difficult aspects of the self at a safe distance, and we require that someone else bear the burden of our intolerance.

At its most malignant, projection is the common root of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and all forms of hatred or injustice perpetrated by one

person (or group of people) upon another. Whenever we make one person, a group, or something *other*, we separate them from our shared humanity and become capable of hurting or destroying that *other* without feeling remorse. It is the great tragedy of humankind that we are capable of harming one another—men, women, and children of all races and religions—because we refuse to come to terms with the projected shadow of intolerance that lives within each one of our souls.

As we learn to catch ourselves in the act of projection, we discover what piece of shadow work we are ready to do next. In projection, we see *out there* what we can't yet see *in here*. But once made conscious, projection helps us gather back parts of ourselves we didn't know we had lost until we began to see them in someone else. This is gratifying if we've been projecting our beauty onto someone else and get to claim it ourselves. But it's challenging when we have to reclaim judgmentalism or negative attributes we would rather not see in ourselves.

In a circle setting, people can learn to take back their projections in a non-blaming way. Meredith often suggests that people ask the question: "Who do I make you be?"

In answering this question, circle members become accountable for their projections and release any unconscious manipulation of other group members by stating them. For example, "Right now, I'm making you be the business expert and hoping you'll solve this problem." This statement is not shaming. It does not point a finger of blame. It simply admits to a truth that was hidden in the shadow and takes back responsibility for the projection.

Projection is often registered in the recipient with a feeling of unease, even when the projection is positive. Projection carries an energetic charge that comes out of the sender's unconscious, a sort of psychological imperative that the receiver must carry the projection, or else. Even a compliment that comes from shadow is confusing: it doesn't feel safe to take it or rebuff it because we intuit the energetic charge that might get set off. When we become aware of a projection and withdraw it, the other person often experiences relief. Continuing the example above, the receiver may respond, "So that explains why I've been feeling in the hot seat!

I'm glad we're going to carry it together from now on."

As we become aware of our projections and begin to clear them up, we reclaim the shadow traits that we had put onto others. We also share the task of keeping the interpersonal field of the circle free of personal material that has little to do with the circle. This is how shadow-tending occurs. Periodically, in the life of any circle or group, we can learn how to help each other reclaim our full selves without major disruption by asking each other, "Anything need clearing here?" or by suggesting "shadow check!" if tension arises.

Using The Circle Way Structure to do Shadow and Projection Work

People who are willing to personally explore and claim shadow and projection contribute significantly to the healthy functioning of any group. The Circle Way provides a structure that can stabilize a group while the individuals within it clear up shadow and projection. This structure includes: self-governing agreements, the three practices of council, and the use of a guardian.

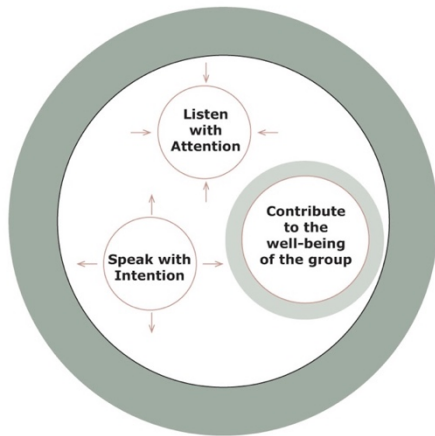
In The Circle Way, members make **agreements** at the beginning to abide by certain standards of behavior. These agreements are often adapted to suit the setting in which the circle occurs, but have at their core an intent similar to this version of the generic agreements of The Circle Way:

- What is said in this circle will remain within our negotiated understanding of confidentiality; and what occurs in this circle will be handled respectfully by all.
- We will listen to each other without casting judgment, and agree to call home our projections and assumptions.
- We will ask for what we want/need, and offer what we can.
- When we don't know what to do or say next, or need a break to get clear, we will pause the action and ask for guidance.

Developing the ability to be accountable to self and others is what makes shadow work a match in circle practice. In the circle, we each agree to assume full personal responsibility for our part in

the work we do together. In living the **three practices of circle**—intentional speaking, attentive listening, and contributing to the group’s well-being—we are constantly attending to our impact and contribution within the group. We pay attention to which parts of us belong in a particular circle, and which do not. We agree to hold a common concern for the effects of our behavior on others in the circle. We also agree to be aware of the effect other people’s behavior is having on us.

Three Practices of Circle



Living by circle agreements and observing the three practices teaches circle members to be aware of their personal boundaries while participating in a collective experience. In Native tradition this is referred to as “sitting in your own hoop.” Each person attends to the interplay of emotion and response going on inside him/herself while monitoring how much of that reaction is based on past experience or expectation versus what is really happening now.

Several years ago, Christina and The Circle Way co-founder, Ann Linnea, worked with a small company where the owner was a man and most of the employees were women. Having read Christina’s book, the man called and asked for help.

“I want two things,” he said, “First, I want the circle to become a way we can operate the business more as colleagues. Second, I’m tired of how the women defer to me. I want to stop carrying patriarchy on my shoulders. I just want to be me, and I want them to be fully themselves.”

At a two-day consultation, Christina and Ann spent the first morning putting The Circle Way structure into place. The afternoon was spent in a round of appreciations, during which everyone on

the staff acknowledged each member of the team. Out of this exercise, every person received positive reflections (but not projections) of how they were perceived and valued. These attributes were written down and placed in front of each person. They were invited to pay attention to whether or not they were aware of these attributes in themselves and to become aware of times they gave away to others strengths and weaknesses that were, in fact, their own.

The second day, Christina and Ann coached group process while the staff met in circle for the first time. They addressed real work situations under an agreement that they would all remain empowered by what they had learned and break out of old deferential or dominating behaviors. By paying minute-by-minute attention to their own impulses to give away or collect attributes, they corrected the imbalances. They broke their old habits and established a healthier, more conscious way of being a team.

Over time, groups that work to keep their relationships clear develop an increasing capacity to make choices before speaking or acting that help fulfill the circle’s purpose. And these practices provide a structure for bringing us back into alignment with each other when we catch a piece of shadow loose within the field.

In a circle that Meredith co-facilitated, she modeled good shadow-tending when she realized that some of her shadow had leaked onto someone else. The members of this circle knew each other well and often used affectionate humor with each other. Sometimes, that humor rose out of the shadow, and the joke had an “edge” to it that was hurtful.

One evening, tired and overwhelmed by the events of a difficult day, Meredith struggled to gather her energy to serve the group. When one member checked in, Meredith cut across talking piece protocol and made a joke at the woman’s expense. At the time, she was not aware of it, and no one spoke of it. The next morning, she woke up with the realization that she had done the very thing she had been inviting the group not to do and set about to clear up the harm she had caused.

She called the group member that day to apologize for her lapse in awareness. “I want to apologize,” she said, “I spoke from my exhaustion and made a joke at your expense. My comment had

nothing to do with you. Are you okay?"

The woman responded with gratitude and relief, "I'm fine, but thank you for catching the sting and being accountable for it. There was a time in my life when I would have been bothered for days by a joke like that. But now I am able to look at my own progress rather than be upset with you." The conversation was respectful and appreciative. When the group met again, the two women shared their exchange with the others, thus insuring the integrity and consistency of the group contract.

Meredith sometimes hands out long decorated paper bags and suggests that people begin to notice, to write down, and to place in their bags symbols of those qualities they have hidden or denied in themselves: qualities such as fear, envy, adoration, admissions of loneliness, confessions of lost hopes and dreams. This tangible activity helps to make the shadow's content conscious. And whatever we are aware of, we can, if we choose, change. We can become curious and begin asking questions:

- When did I put this part of me away?
- Why did it seem necessary?
- How is it showing up now?
- What attention does it need?
- How can I take care of this without disrupting the focus of this group?

Shadow material is at times apparent in another person's tone of voice, facial expression or body language, as well as in what they say. Shadow material may lead people to energetically withdraw from the rim of the circle or intrude into the center of the circle, acting-out behaviors that damage the group's sense of cohesiveness (including certain kinds of humor) or actively projecting onto others in the circle.ⁱⁱⁱ Shadow material is always felt or intuited before it is readily identified. When something from the shadow is being energetically discharged into the circle, group members may seem distracted, bored, tense or uneasy. When these energetic symptoms show up, it's time to call for a stop-action, a brief period of silence and reflection, so that each participant can gather himself or herself back into the boundaries of his/her own hoop.

In many circles, a member volunteers each meeting to serve as a **guardian of the group energy and interaction**. The guardian watches what is happening in the circle, both in the verbal and nonverbal exchanges, and calls for breaks in

action based on everything from the need to take a bathroom break, to the need to intercede in heated discussion. A few moments of quiet reflection in the midst of chaotic group interaction or energetic discharge allows everyone the space to think about what's happening inside and around them and get ready to contribute to problem solving.

We have found the role of guardian to be essential in empowering groups to self-correct their interactions in a non-blaming/shaming way. A guardian has the permission of the circle to call for breaks in the action. At these times, all group members agree to stop and take a breath.

The guardian uses a bell, a rattle, or any other agreed upon signal or sound. After a few seconds, the guardian usually rings the bells a second time and speaks to why she or he called for the pause. After a pause and explanation, the group returns to interaction, with a renewed thoughtfulness accompanying group process. It is also essential that *anyone* who sees the need for a pause in action asks for it, whether or not they are guardian in the moment. "Ring the bell, please," can be an incredibly helpful intervention for the whole circle.

In a women's circle we were coaching, one member excitedly suggested that the entire group go to Mexico and stay at a time-share condo that one of the members had access to.

Immediate excitement and camaraderie broke out except for one woman, who began to interject comments about bad water, food poisoning, and trashy Mexican towns. The guardian rang the bell. "Something's amiss," she said. "I don't get it, but let's take a break and stretch for a few minutes before we come back to the conversation."

When the circle reconvened, the woman who had been complaining asked to speak. "I can't afford this trip," she said. "An hour ago I told you I'm about to lose my job. This conversation makes me feel ignored, like you're all going on a vacation without so much as a good-bye to me."

Once this projection was verbalized and understood, the circle of friends could reconnect as a cohesive unit. They decided to take a weekend trip closer to home, and to keep reviewing their assumptions about each other's economic resources and freedoms. Recently, they instituted a bank account for their circle to collect money they will use together.

All of these stories demonstrate successful shadow work. They are creative responses to common group issues. After a time, shadow practice becomes good group hygiene. Whenever a circle de-stabilizes, we can remember to check our own shadow and to reflect on how we might have contributed to the de-stabilization. When handled in a circle that is practicing ongoing accountability, the emergence of shadow brings forth curiosity and learning rather than fear. The circle stabilizes again, stronger at the wobbly places.

Shadow work can become a spiritual practice: a way to join our efforts with others who want to act peacefully, compassionately, and justly in the personal relationships we have in our workplaces, communities, neighborhoods, churches, family life and friendships. Attending to the work of shadow and to the withdrawal of our projections from others is something we can all do to make the world around us a better place for all people to live.

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 legacy book, *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*, the movement expanded globally and was rebranded as The Circle Way.

About the Authors



Christina Baldwin
M.S. Educational Psychology

Christina has worked within a variety of consulting settings since 1995, and has trained circle practitioners and a next generation of circle teachers. Trained in a range of facilitation modalities, she carries as her central skill an original group process methodology based on circle practice. Through her educational company, PeerSpirit, Inc., she and co-founder Ann Linnea, along with their teaching colleagues, specialize in communication as the core enhancement for organizational, community, and family culture.

For thirty years, Christina has been fascinated with the ways that narrative shapes life. Her books are an exploration of belief in the power of language to create social bonds. Titles include two classics in the field of journal writing, as well as her seminal work, *Storycatcher, Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*. Christina also articulated circle process in *Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture*, and *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*, which she co-authored with Ann Linnea.

Baldwin lives on an island near Seattle, Washington. After years of extensive travel to lecture, teach, and call people into conversations of heart, purpose, and activism, she is focusing those energies within her own community.



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Meredith is a licensed clinical professional counselor in private practice in Southern Maine for 35 years. She works with individuals, couples and groups around a wide spectrum of relational issues, implementing circle practice in most of those settings or sessions. In 2003, she founded and still facilitates “The Living Spiritual Elders Project,” a program of spiritual study of the wisdom teachings and traditions from all walks of life. You can learn more about this community on “The Living Spiritual Elders Project” page on Facebook. She is also the author of *Embracing the Mystery: The Sacred Unfolding in Ordinary People and Everyday Lives* and *Standing Still: Hearing the Call to a*

ⁱ *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* by Robert Bly, published by HarperOne, 1988.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*, pages 162-63, by Christina Baldwin. All references are from the revised edition published by Bantam in 1998.

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About this booklet

This booklet is part of several explorations on the work of shadow in groups, specifically the challenge and empowerment that shadow brings to self-governing and collaborative conversations, such as The Circle Way. For further information, please see the chapters in Christina Baldwin’s book, *Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture*, which focus on “Challenges to Circle” (chapter 8) and “When the Circle Shatters” (chapter 9). Shadow in circle is also deeply explored in Baldwin and Ann Linnea’s latest book, *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*, in which they focus on “Activating and Responding in a Social Container” (chapter 8) and “Why Circle Takes Us to the Shadow” (chapter 9).

For more information

For resources and information about trainings, consulting, and seminars, visit thecircleway.net.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on circle energetics, please reference the PeerSpirit booklet, [Understanding Energetics in Circles and Groups](#), by Cheryl Conklin and Ann Linnea, or Chapter 8 in *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*.