

# THE LISTENING CENTER

Workshops, Retreats and Presentations on the Sacred Art of Listening

## Circle Principles

Sitting in circles is rooted in ancient tradition. Circles have been a common form for discussing issues of importance to the community throughout the ages and in our time. Circles provide support, generate mutual understanding, strengthen relationships and create spaces for healing and transformation. Circles are egalitarian – all voices are heard equally. There is no front of the room or head table. They convey a sense of connectedness – we can see each other. The center becomes a focal point – a sacred space.

Setting: Arrange seating in a circle, without tables or desks. In the center, on a small table or even on the floor, you might want to create a focal point by using a beautiful scarf, a candle or some flowers, as a reminder of the sacred nature of the center.

Opening Ceremony: Mark the beginning of your time together in a circle with a brief ceremony. It is a way of welcoming everyone into the gathering, and reminds us of our interconnections. It helps us to create the safe space for our conversation. Welcome people into the circle; follow by a ritual such as lighting a candle, a few minutes of silence or the reading of a poem or short inspirational quote. A second ritual is to mark the rim of the circle by walking around the outside of the circle and inviting those still seated to welcome, greet and appreciate each one with a silent gaze.

Connecting: Each voice is important in the circle, and adds to the whole. The next step is to invite everyone to introduce themselves – briefly – just saying their name, where they live, and a short “tweet” length version about something in their lives, or why they chose to attend this circle, or what they are feeling now. Once each voice is heard, the sense of community deepens, you have created a space for deep listening.

Circle Guidelines: To ensure that everyone is on the same page it is useful to share some guidelines for circle conversations. Review them each time you gather.

Listen and speak with respect, compassion, curiosity.

One person speaks at a time, without interruption or comments.

Speak for yourself and from your own experience.

Hold stories or personal material in confidentiality.

Be willing to discover and explore, look for something new.

Some groups use a talking piece to help focus attention on one speaker at a time – a seashell, stick, stone or any small object. The person holding the talking piece is the only one who can speak. It can be passed around the circle, or placed in the center of the circle and the next person who wants to speak takes it from there.

Most groups begin with a question or a topic to focus the sharing. State the question or topic and invite someone to begin and hand the talking piece to them. People may be quiet or uncertain. There may be times of silence. This is normal though it does sometimes make people uncomfortable at first. Silence honors what’s been said and creates space for deeper thinking. Inform everyone when you are five minutes from the end time and invite anyone who has not yet spoken if they would like to add something. Often at least one person will respond to this invitation.

Closing Ceremony: To complete the circle invite everyone to think of one or two words which express what it was like to be in the circle, or any insight they had during the circle time. Go around the circle one last time. Blow out the candle or say – this circle is now complete.