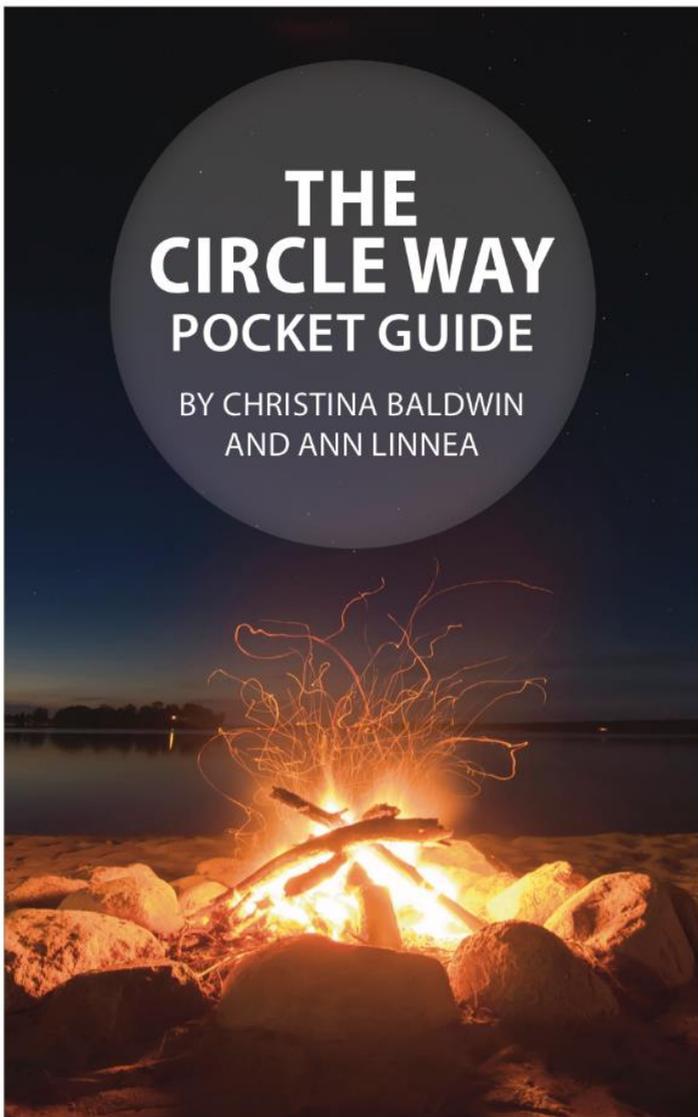


THE CIRCLE WAY POCKET GUIDE

BY CHRISTINA BALDWIN
AND ANN LINNEA



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The ideas in this booklet come from:

- [*Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture*](#) by Christina Baldwin
- [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#) by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea
- The lived experience of Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea and a global cadre of teachers.

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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.”

(Calling the Circle, page 204)

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Introduction

What The Circle Way is

This guide is part of an extensive body of work developed over more than 20 years and practiced globally. [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#), is the central book on the subject and is augmented by a number of booklets, articles, field guides, maps, and other tools, which you'll find at TheCircleWay.net, an online resource for information, trainings, teachers, and practices.

Designed to give you the essence of The Circle Way process, this booklet provides enough information for you to be able to call a circle and for participants to understand the process as you begin together. You will note references to the book *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair* that send you into deeper discussion of various topics.

We highly recommend that you extend your exploration into this powerful form of dialogue and meeting beyond these pages.

A culture of conversation

Since the 1990s, a number of circle-based methodologies have been designed with the purpose of sustaining meaningful dialogue in the modern world. This booklet outlines what you need to participate in a particular group process known as The Circle Way. Established by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea in 1994, The Circle Way has been used successfully around the world by a wide variety of groups with an equal variety of intentions and purposes. That is the great adaptivity of circle: it enables us to gather around an idea, to each contribute our wisdom, and to decide on a well-considered collective course of action.

The Circle Way provides a kind of skeletal structure that strengthens and organizes dialogue. Putting the chairs in a circle, putting a symbolic representation of purpose in the middle, checking in around an opening question, and using a “talking piece” creates a qualitative shift that is so striking that most people quickly adapt and look forward to experiencing circle again. The story of this process, originally called “PeerSpirit Circle Process,” is outlined in the Preface of [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#).

What circle is

Circle is a social structure that has helped people come together in collaborative dialogue and action since the beginning of time. Our ancestors came to the campfire to cook, to keep themselves warm and safe, to tell stories, and to establish rules of behavior and governance that supported community development. These are the same reasons people come to the circle today: to be social, to discover safe methods of dialogue, to share stories, build community, and hold meetings in a collaborative manner. Circle enables us to discover our collective wisdom. It helps us discover who we really are to each other as well as the resources we can offer to our conversations and tasks.

Circle practice contains these common elements:

- People face each other and every voice is considered contributory.
- Agreements of participation and a definition of respect are articulated.
- Conversation is viewed as a practice set apart from casual social interaction.
- The event has a beginning/middle/end and a structure that holds it.
- The archetype of circle is present in the space, often through making a visible center.

Who we think you are

We assume that you, the initial reader, are the caller of a circle, and so we outline the preparatory stages. If you are a person who has been asked to join and participate, this booklet will help you understand the care that has gone into preparation and learn how to call a circle yourself.

Preparation and invitation

Before you call your first circle, there are four ways to prepare.

Set the intention.

Intention provides the basic foundation for calling a circle. Setting intention means getting clear about what you want to accomplish or experience for yourself and others.

Write a simple statement of intent. The intention lays out the topic, which can be anything from new parenting to grandparenting, job training to retirement planning, spiritual study to social activism. The intention lets people know what they are being invited to, the scope of the commitment, and what the conversation will address. People can then make a clear choice to join or not join, and they will know how to contribute to the development of your idea.

For example: “I am inviting people to meet X times a month for X months to support each other in _____. I see this group as having the time and energy to provide mutual support by listening to each other and, when appropriate, providing creative suggestions and comments. At the end of our original commitment, we may renegotiate to continue, release the process as complete, or allow members who feel complete with the process to exit gracefully.”

Talk to people.

Share your thoughts. Talking about an idea is good practice. Two helpful things happen when you talk: story and question. A story explains your thoughts, feelings, and actions to others. It helps others understand why something is important, what your hopes are, and what the plan of action is. A story inspires others to think, feel, and act with you. When people listen to your story, they raise questions that help you refine your intention.

For example: “I noticed a build-up of trash in the neighborhood, and instead of complaining about it, I thought it might be a great way to call some neighbors together. I want to meet first in this circle process so we can all share what we most enjoy about living here and what we’re going to do to maintain our enjoyment. Then we can pick up trash together — and talk to people while we’re out on the street. Next month, we can check in again and see what our experiences have been, maybe enlist

more people to help with the next thing we want to do to improve things. Flowers on the corners? Installing dog-poop bag dispensers? I don't know, but it could be fun.”

Envision the circle.

Story and question lead to vision. The more you refine your intent, talk with others, and respond to questioning, the clearer the vision becomes of the circle you want to call. And you may identify people who are interested in joining.

Imagine being in a circle that is carrying out the intention you have defined. Ask yourself these questions:

- What intention is this circle based on?
- Who is there? (Describe the attributes of circle members or name people you hope will attend.)
- How many people are in the circle?
- What diversity do you seek: gender, age, ethnic, racial, religious, and economic?
- Why are you seeking or limiting diversity?
- What shared understandings do people need to have?
- What kinds of clarity do you want members of the circle, including yourself, to be able to contribute?
- What would circle meetings be like?
- How often would they take place?
- How long would each circle be?
- Where would the circle meet?

Identify and invite participants.

The next question is: *Who do you hope will respond to your invitation?* While you have been setting intention, talking to people, and creating your vision, who has come to mind as a potential contributing member for this circle? Who has expressed interest? Think about the attributes you hope circle members will bring. Make a list of these people and start contacting them.

Invite people by writing out your intention in one paragraph. *What do people need to know to decide if they are interested in responding to this call?* Edit. Clarify. Even if you're going to invite people verbally — by talking on the phone or meeting with them in person — they may want to see something written to help them decide.

For more information, see Chapter 3, “The Power of Preparation, Invitation, Intention, and Center,” in [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#).

The first gathering of a new circle

Okay, you are ready: call the first meeting. Find a space appropriate to your intention where you can have privacy and quiet around the circle’s edge. Maybe it’s a room in the library, a friend’s living room, an office meeting space that is free in the afternoons. You may have to move the chairs and tables to make a circle space.

Prepare the space.

Arrange the seating in a circle. When people find their place at the rim of a circle, half the work of explanation is accomplished. Sitting in a circle enables people to notice who’s there, to greet each other, say names, get comfortable, settle in, and assume a sense of equality. Perfect roundness is not required.

Make a centre.

The center represents the focal point of the group. If you think of the circle as a wheel, the center is the hub. If you think of the circle as a campfire, the center is the fire itself. Making the center tangible allows people to visualize the reason for gathering.

- The center is the symbolic representation of intention. In business, you might print and display placards of the company’s values or project goals; in education you might set out student photos and the school logo; in a spiritual group, the center might consist of candles, flowers, and natural objects. Just one focal object can make a fine, unobtrusive, and yet powerful center.
- Placing objects in the middle of the circle reminds everyone that there is a common point that organizes and focuses the coming conversation. Don’t step on the center if it’s laid out on the floor; don’t set debris like cups or napkins into the space if objects are laid out on a table.

Have a talking piece ready.

A “talking piece” is any object designated to grant the person holding it the right to speak. A circle of teachers may pass around an apple; a circle of new mothers may pass around a baby toy; a circle of

lawyers may pass around a gavel. Pieces from nature, a rock, shell, feather, or flower are popular objects as well. You'll find information about using the talking piece later in this booklet.

Open the circle.

Use a start point to call people together. Silence, reading a poem, ringing a chime, all signal to people that the circle is beginning and help shift attention from socializing to listening.

Listening and speaking in circle requires heightened attention. One purpose of opening and closing the circle intentionally is to signal when this quality of attention is requested. Before and after circle, there is time to chat, but while circle is open people need to be more acutely attentive.

Tell your story.

How did this idea come to you and why have you asked this particular group to gather? You're the host. In this first meeting, your willingness to speak first gives other people time to get comfortable and models the kind of sharing you might want of others. You're setting context — the frame that shapes how people enter this experience.

Be organized in your thoughts; it's okay to have written notes or guidelines. If you tend to be long-winded, follow your outline and then be quiet. Address such questions as:

- What idea or need started you thinking about calling a circle?
- Why did you invite each individual, and what do you hope for the group?

Suggest group agreements.

Group agreements provide an interpersonal safety net for participation in the conversations that are about to occur.

In a circle, where you're practicing rotating leadership and shared responsibility, agreements tell people what they can expect from each other and what is likely to happen in the exchanges between them.

In an ongoing group, agreements may be best established through discussion and finding your own words to what is needed. At the beginning of a circle or in a one-time meeting, the following generic agreements provide a safety net for beginning.

- *Keep personal material confidential.* Confidentiality enables people to share their stories with the assurance that they will not be gossiped about.
- *Listen with curiosity and compassion, withholding judgment.* Curiosity allows people to listen, sort, and speak without having to be in total agreement with each other. Circle is an environment in which people learn to honor differences with respect.
- *Ask for what you need and offer what you can.* Generally, if a request fits within the intention of the group, someone in the circle will respond: if a request doesn't fit, there will be a lack of interest. Circle members will learn to negotiate what they can and cannot do, and hold intention for the direction of group energy.
- *Practice the pause.* To create these pauses, one member of the circle volunteers to serve as “circle guardian” (explained more fully later in this booklet). When the guardian rings a chime, all action stops for 15-plus seconds (this is the time it takes for three slow breaths). During a pause, each person breathes, focuses on the center and waits. The guardian will ring the bell a second time to release the silence and briefly explain why he or she called the pause. Common reasons for ringing the bell include a need for a stretch break, signaling that something significant has been spoken, or calling the group to mindfulness of time and shared contributions. Anyone in the circle can ask the guardian to ring the pause.

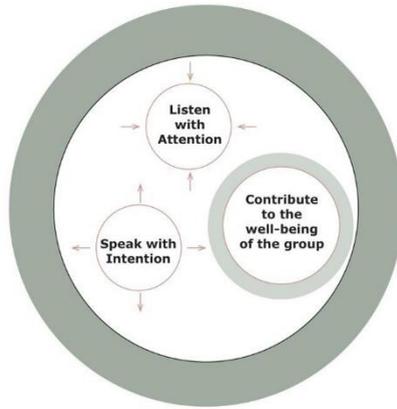
These agreements are sufficient to begin the circle. As your circle continues, you may want to add agreements or modify the language. Agreements are updatable. If something is not working: revise your agreements and maintain the process. If trouble develops, the group can work together to search for an agreement that will better support you. Be prepared to write this list and additions, to have copies available for the group, and to bring agreements up for review after the circle has met for a while. When members live by their agreements, the circle continuously self-corrects its course.

You don't have to front-load the whole structure of circle, but the agreements are essential to help the group safely proceed.

For more information, see Chapter 2, “The Components of Circle,” in [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#).

Share the three practices of circle.

In attending to the verbal skills of circle, there are **three practices** that govern what we offer the group.



Listen with attention means focusing clearly on what is being said by someone else. In the circle, listening often becomes a spiritual practice: we receive each other’s stories and insights. There is a sense of satisfaction to listening and being heard.

Speak with intention means contributing what has relevance, heart, and meaning to the topic and situation of the moment. Intentional speaking requires patience until we understand what to contribute and how to speak our truth without blame or judgment.

Contribute to the wellbeing of the group means considering the impact of our words and actions before, during, and after we interact. Before speaking, it is wise to ask ourselves: how will my contribution benefit what we are all doing here together?

These are the interpersonal skills we offer the circle. These skills allow us to maintain the three principles. They are complex skills, and no one will do them perfectly.

Share the three principles of circle.

There are also **three principles of circle** that are at work in a group practicing The Circle Way.



Leadership rotates means that every person helps the circle function by assuming increments of leadership. Participating in circle is a commitment to claiming individual leadership. A circle is an *all-leader* group. Group facilitation shifts from a model of permanent leadership to a model of changing and inclusive leadership.

Responsibility is shared means that participants pay attention to what needs doing or saying next and are willing to do their share. In The Circle Way, responsibility also shifts moment-by-moment and task-by-task. Shared responsibility is based on the trust that someone will come forward to provide what the circle needs.

Reliance is on wholeness means that members place ultimate reliance in the center of the circle and take their place at the rim. Through simple rituals and consistent refocusing, the center houses collective intention and holds neutral space.

This is a lot of talking for you and a lot of listening for new members. You may want to have the agreements, practices and principles as a handout for the group (or share this booklet), so you can proceed into the topic and study the nuances of circle process as you move forward. As people get comfortable with the structure of circle process, they'll want to learn more about it, and to know how to ensure

that the group continues to present a dynamic opportunity for learning and sharing.

For more information, see Chapter 5, “Accountability Through Agreements, Practices, and Principles,” in [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#).

Check-in: The first round of sharing

When you have welcomed people, spoken the agreements and intention, and shared a bit of your story, you will want to invite participants to share why they are here and what they hope to contribute. The first time speaking is called a *check-in* — a chance for participants to introduce themselves, respond to intention, and share their own stories about what brings them to the circle. The use of a talking piece greatly helps this process, as it helps people listen and discourages cross-talk so that everyone has an equal say.

Check-in is an important way to start each circle. It informs the whole group how each member is showing up. Just asking that as an opening question (“How is everyone showing up today?”) leads to a surprising amount of diversity and cohesion. For example:

“I just got some bad news that rattled me — but I’m working to set that aside and be here.”

Or

“My twins made the honor roll, which hasn’t got anything to do with this circle, but I’m a pretty proud mama at the moment.”

Nobody needs “fixing,” there isn’t a call for intervention, but the group gathers a bit of authentic information from each person that creates a sense of cohesive wholeness.

Check-in can also be inspired by any number of questions, whatever will advance the conversation of the group, help people introduce themselves, or get to know one another better. This is a time when short storytelling shines and can help people see their commonalities in the midst of their differences.

For more information, see Chapter 6, “Circle, Step by Step,” in [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#).

Introducing and using a talking piece

The practice of passing a talking piece from hand to hand has been used in circles from earliest times. The talking piece is a great equalizer among those who differ in age, race, gender, or status because it ensures that everyone at the rim has the opportunity to make an equal contribution.

When you're introducing the talking piece, let participants know that it's perfectly acceptable to say nothing and hand the piece on if they aren't ready to speak. At the end of a round, you may offer those who didn't speak another chance to contribute. Encourage people to trust the process. Let them know that there's no pressure to carry on when they have nothing to say and to take their turn when they have a contribution to make.

Let participants know that, when one person has the talking piece, others *listen without interruption* or commentary. The use of a talking piece controls the impulse to pick up on what a person is saying, to interrupt with jokes or sympathetic remarks, or to ask diverting questions. *The purpose of using a talking piece for this first round is to guarantee that every person has the opportunity to be heard.*

It's often helpful to suggest a timeframe for a talking-piece round. Do the math for the group: "We are __ number of people. If we each speak for __ minutes, we have __ minutes to finish this round." In the first round of a new circle, you may want to take longer to check in than at subsequent meetings.

After a complete round, the piece may be passed again or placed in the center. In smaller circles, or among long-standing groups, the piece may simply reside in the center, so people can reach for it when they are ready to contribute.

Not every conversation needs to be held with a talking piece, but it's an excellent way to heighten attention and slow down interactions, so that circle members really listen to one another.

Structures for sustaining a circle

Circling organizes group energy. To sustain a circle, the group needs to take ownership of how it engages these organizing principles. As a peer-based process, these conversations are best developed collegially: you don't need to have everything in place before you call the first meeting, though you may find yourself in a kind of teaching/hosting role for a while as the group realizes it needs to learn more about circle so that leadership can rotate and responsibility can be shared.

Building continuity

Designing a circle structure that meets your needs, works to fulfill intention, and feels comfortable for participants will free up creativity and build trust in the process. Continuity answers the questions: *When and how will the circle officially begin? What's on the agenda for the evening (or for the life-cycle of the circle)? When and how does the circle officially end?*

One of the first collective duties of the circle is to design its continuity by choosing the framing devices that will organize circle activities. In most circles, continuity consists of some of the following elements:

Opening rituals or signals — ringing a bell, lighting a candle, laying a circle of ribbon out on the floor or tabletop, reciting poetry, meditating in silence, or whatever inspires members.

A conversational pattern — checking in; establishing agenda, focus, or topics of conversation; deciding on tasks and actions; setting arrangements to host the next meeting; checking out.

Preserving group history — reading from and adding to a logbook, arranging things in the center, recording or scribing conversations that set group course, or taking photographs of favorite moments.

Closing rituals or signals — singing, silence, words of wisdom, blowing out the candle, or whatever helps circle members know that the circle has come to an end and that they can now interact socially and depart.

Setting time and agenda

Circles gather because someone says, “Let’s meet here, on this day, at this time, until this time, for the purpose of...”

Conversation and shared understanding about time is essential: people need to know the scope of commitment they are making. They need to know that, if the circle evolves in a direction that doesn’t fit their needs or interests, there will be a graceful way for them to exit, or to enter as a newcomer.

Circles need intermediate exit points. Even circles that hope to go on forever, like intentional communities or committed friends, need time to reconsider their agreements, air problems or tensions, and have members recommit or leave with the blessings of the group. When we acknowledge that the circle itself has a kind of life cycle — that it has a beginning, middle and end—we are better able to respect each other and our time together.

It’s very helpful to know how much hourly time the circle will require in actual meetings, between meeting commitments, and how many times the circle is contracting to meet. The intention will determine much of this timing. For example, “Let’s meet every other Monday from 5 to 7 p.m. for a total of eight times. Then let’s re-evaluate how the project and process are going. The first meeting is an introduction, and you may opt in or out at the end of that session.”

Once the time commitment is in place, then the group needs to address what happens after check-in and before check-out. This is determined by the nature of the group and its intention. A study group has a conversation about whatever they are studying; a book group discusses the book; a family council offers up topics to be discussed between parents and children. Agenda emerges when needed.

For more information, see Chapter 4, “Rotating Positions of Leadership in the Circle,” in [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#).

In an informal circle, when agenda is not needed, participants still come to rely on established patterns of meeting: check-in, round of insight gathering, topical conversation (using a talking piece or open conversation), and checking out, knowing the host and guardian will help hold focus and timing. All these structures sustain satisfaction with group process.

Roles in circle

Leadership in circle is embedded in the rim. This means everyone sits at equal height and placement, and participates with a sense of equality. *And* it's helpful to have someone who is holding the course for the meeting, someone who is watching time and subtle group needs, and someone who is recording insights, decisions, **and** action commitments. These roles, which often change as rotating leadership and shared responsibility grow, are the host, guardian, and scribe.

Host: The person who issues the invitation, prepares the space where a circle conversation will be held (setting the rim and center), helps define the scope of conversation, and then participates in it from a position of peer leadership.

Guardian: A volunteer who teams with the host to help the circle stay centered and intentional. Based on the fourth agreement, the bell rings twice: once to stop the action — a few seconds of observed pause — followed by a second bell that signals return to interaction. The guardian then speaks to the reason for pausing. Anyone can ask the guardian to initiate a pause.

Scribe: A circle participant who agrees to preserve insights and notes decisions and actions. Sometimes, rather than a single scribe, responsibility for harvesting the conversation is shared by all participants. Scribing is optional and used more often in business or community meetings than informally.

For more information, see Chapter 4, “Rotating Positions of Leadership,” in [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#).

The role of guardian

People are accustomed to being “facilitated” in a meeting, so the role of host is not new; the same is true of someone who is taking notes. However, this role of a bell-ringer is often new. People may resist it, and yet it is one of the most significant contributions of The Circle Way process.

In partnership with the host, a “guardian” *watches over and helps safeguard the more subtle aspects of group process*. To employ this simple method of guardianship, the circle needs to supply itself with a small brass bell, chime, rattle, or rain stick — any object that makes a pleasant and loud enough sound to be heard during conversation. Usually rotating on a meeting-by-meeting basis, one person volunteers to serve

as guardian and has the group's permission to intercede in group process for the purpose of calling a pause. This pause reminds participants to speak to the center, focus on the task or topic at hand, or observe respectful practices.

Discussion may have become heated; the host may be struggling to respond to questions; someone holding the talking piece may not be aware that he or she has rambled on; or someone may share something that the group needs to sit with respectfully before the next person speaks. At these moments, the guardian signals for silence using the agreed upon sound-maker, holds that silence for 15 seconds or more, and when the group is ready, releases the silence back into the pattern of meeting.

Over and over again, we have found the guardian to be central to The Circle Way, particularly in those inevitable times when conflict arises. Anyone may ask the guardian to ring the bell at any time. This is one of the ways that leadership rotates in a circle. One person holds the responsibility of guardian, but others can be of help.

Choosing forms of circle

There are three forms of circle: conversation, talking piece, and silence. The three principles, three practices, and careful attention to center are essential in each form.

Conversation is the most common, informal manner of talking together and can be a part of circle gatherings. In conversation, people pick up on what another is saying, react, interact, brainstorm, agree and disagree, persuade, and interject new ideas, thoughts, and opinions. The energy of open dialogue stimulates the free flow of ideas. There are times when conversation loosens up circle process and times when circle works better being slowed down a bit, allowed calmer pacing and more contemplation. This is when a talking piece is called for.

Talking piece circle is a more formal pattern of meeting. As explained earlier, when employing a talking piece, the authority to speak is passed from person to person. One person at a time has the floor, and the group listens attentively. The purpose of talking piece circle is to gather information from the whole group, to garner insight and show respect for each person's presence, to hear collective wisdom, and to have a check-in about where everyone is regarding a particular topic. You may choose to hold this talking-piece circle as a way of witnessing

the stories each member carries, in which each person speaks without reference to what has been said by others, or you may use this circle as a forum that builds thoughtfully on the statements of others while adding new contributions from each group member.

Silence has not usually been considered a form of meeting in mainstream settings, but rather an experience of awkwardness when nobody is sure what to say next. In circle, where the ultimate goal is to understand the wholeness at the heart of the experience, silence is an essential element. Silence gives people spaciousness in group process to listen to themselves, sometimes to access an inner voice of wisdom, that, when shared, becomes the catalyst that provides healing, shift, or insight for the group. Silence is most often introduced in 15-second pauses instituted by the guardian. As the group realizes what 15 seconds can offer, people often request longer pauses or the chance to sit for a few minutes in silence with one another to attune the group as folks enter from very different experiences earlier in the day. Silence can allow the acknowledgment of spiritual presence without dogma. A five-minute silent circle can be an effective centering tool before a longer talking-piece circle. During this time, people can find a state of composure that allows them to listen with attention, speak with intention, and tend to the wellbeing of the whole.

Keeping track of commitments

You may want to create and maintain a circle logbook, which contains circle agreements, group and individual commitments, task statements, practicalities of meeting arrangements, accountability, and even accounting. In the logbook, members who enjoy the scribe role may maintain a record of what is actually going on in the circle and use it to revive memory and review who agreed to do what. The logbook holds the circle's history. You may include formal sections to track the ongoing work of the circle and informal sections to keep track of the fun — photographs, anecdotes, running jokes, as well as running wisdom. This can be done on paper or electronically. Chapter four in [*The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*](#) also contains a section on meaningful “harvest” tools for recording the experiences of a circle.

For example, among a circle of neighbors, the logbook might track check-in stories (“Here’s what’s happening with my remodeling plans this month...”), informal community business, (“I heard Bob was in the

hospital, is there anything we can do?”), and the accounting of their barter system (“One mowed lawn equals one dinner on the deck”).

A circle of people exploring conscious aging might keep a logbook of suggested topics for the coming months and a narrative of the insightful gems that have been spoken in response to previous topics. (For more information about circles devoted to the subject of aging, see the Kindle booklet titled [*The Circle Way for Proactive Aging: A Harvest of Years.*](#))

Keeping the logbook is part of sharing leadership. The convener for the next meeting will probably carry the logbook and bring it to the next session. Some circles have a basket that holds the center objects, the logbook, and other symbols of their particular circle. Whoever has the basket calls the next meeting.

How to make decisions in circle

Circle is an embodied form of meeting: we have to really show up for the conversations that happen, and for the decisions that get made. Everyone can see everyone else. Making decisions in this environment is a courageous act of full participation.

At its core, circle is a consensual process in which participants take collective responsibility for actions. It doesn't require that everyone have the same degree of enthusiasm for each action or decision, and sometimes people may openly disagree with an action, yet not so strongly that they want to stall a decision.

To get a sense of the readiness to make a decision, The Circle Way advises a talking-piece round, so that every voice is heard without interruption, followed by a signal vote, which can be paper ballot, but is most often a physical gesture, so the “vote” is visible and dialogue can continue. Most common, is a thumbs vote. Thumb up means “I'm for it, ready to support and do it.” Thumb sideways means “I have a question that needs addressing or a comment I need to add before I can decide.” Thumb down means “I'm against it. I don't think this is the right way for us to go.” If needed, more clarifying conversation occurs, led by anyone with a sideways or down-turned thumb. The down-turned thumb indicates disapproval, but may not necessarily block action. With further conversation, the person may actually be saying, “I don't support this action, but the group may proceed if it chooses.” Those who object may change their minds — or change the minds of others in the group.

These are moments of insight and learning. They take time. However, the decision made as a result of this process is always stronger. There is a story attached to the choice-point, (“Boy remember how hard we worked to decide to ... And look where we are now!”)

The power of check-out

You opened the circle with respect and have imbued the conversation with collective energy, good intention, excitement, nervousness, and heartfelt sharing. *It’s important to close with a check-out, to signal that the circle meeting is over.*

A circle that has met for only a few hours usually requires only a simple, short acknowledgment. Perhaps a round that answers a question such as: What are you taking with you from our time together? What did you learn? What was a highlight for you? At the end of a long seminar or ongoing group, where circle energy has deepened, the closing will naturally reflect the intimacy that has developed.

As you enter this phase of the circle time, you may want to revisit your understanding of what is confidential and what may be shared, so that members have a chance to speak briefly what they learned, heard, appreciated, or are committed to doing.

After this last round of speaking and listening, you may want to designate the time, place, or host for the next meeting. Then, blow out the candle, offer a quote, poem, song, or brief silence. The group will erupt into social time and you will all notice a qualitative difference.

Creative responses to difficulties

Trust the process

Group process is seldom noticed when it's functioning well, but it does get noticed when it's falling apart. Social discomfort and occasional confusion are unavoidable and natural. For example, in the usual course of conversation, someone may misinterpret a statement or action or challenge someone else's statement or action. Two members may be at odds with each other about something outside the group. Silence may carry tension instead of calm.

When there is tension in the group's process, you may have an impulse to jump in and smooth out the silence or help things along. Let go of control by remembering simply to "hold the circle." Allow a small vacuum of energy to exist, so there is space for another person to make a helpful comment, take responsibility, or call attention to intention. In such moments, the pause called by the guardian, or by any member who asks the guardian to call a pause, is one of your most powerful tools. Tension is like a yellow light at an intersection: if everyone tries to speed through, a crash is likely to occur. But if everyone slows down, looks both ways, assesses who/what needs to stop and who/what needs to proceed, the moment becomes a successful teaching in the life of the circle.

If tension builds, it will be necessary for you and others to do some reflection, gain clarity, and hold a circle in which everyone can speak their perspective — remembering to practice curiosity, not judgment!

You can do a little journal writing with yourself at home. Write your feelings or worries out on the page, so you can read them and think things through. If you decide to talk with another circle member, respect confidentiality and don't gossip. Set up agreements for the conversation, be straightforward, and be clear that you're seeking to understand your own part in what's happening. Speak in "I" statements.

All participants go through times of feeling calm and relaxed about their involvement in a circle; everyone goes through times of feeling scared and vulnerable, uncomfortable in the middle of group process and irritated by others who are present. Everyone has the opportunity to be deeply moved by the circle's healing and to be aware of being in the

presence of synergy. (For more information about improving group process, see the companion booklet titled *Understanding Shadow and Projection in Circles and Groups.*)

Real trust comes from going through the bumpy, scary, risky and vulnerable aspects of circling. A group doesn't know its full strength until it has faced a problem, resolved a conflict, or gotten several members through a crisis. The circle that has lost its innocence and come through crisis with respect for each other and the process is a circle of matured stability.

For more information, see Chapter 8, "Activating and Responding in a Social Container," and Chapter 9, "Why Circle Takes Us to the Shadow" in *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair.*

Restate intention

Working to understand, articulate, and clarify intention is the step most commonly ignored in circles. In the sweetness of a new circle, common intention may be assumed. In the disruption phase, lack of common intention is exposed. Reworking intention can save a circle that's floundering or help groups understand why things fail to work. Putting the original intention into the center and questioning if that is still meaningful, still the rallying point of the group, is a great way to talk about a build-up of tension without focusing on personalities: getting clear, again, as a collective activity, can be energizing and soothing.

Questions that can help a circle get back on track

When people are anxious, or the circle is in difficulty, it's helpful to reframe the problem: don't focus on individual behavior; look at overall process. Ask these questions:

- Does this circle have a clearly negotiated and agreed-upon intent?
- What is this intent? Do we remember? Are we keeping it in mind?
- What are the group agreements? Do we need to add or change an agreement?
- If the structures of The Circle Way are being used, how come the circle is out of balance?
- Do we trust that we will be supported if we assume leadership and address concerns and issues as they arise?
- Is responsibility being shared?
- Are we using guardianship in our circles?
- Do we support someone who is offering a challenge or being challenged?
- Do we call for silence? Use the pause?
- What is coming forward for healing?

For more information, see Chapter 8, “Activating and Responding in A Social Container” in [*The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair.*](#))

Because it encourages autonomy and shares authority, circling is an extremely complex social form, delicate and sturdy at the same time. There is so much going on in the moment: our senses, intuition, intellect, and emotions are all called to attention. When circling, group process will fall apart and reform, fall apart and reform. You will need to rebalance the circle and mend the connections, learn your lessons, and trust again.

Four stages of a circle's life

A circle has a natural life span — four stages that occur as the circle moves through time, *and* that are mirrored in miniature the course of every meeting.

Stage 1: Building trust

Creating a structure that every member can count on and a history of respectful interaction develops trust. Everything discussed so far in sustaining circles builds trust.

Circles may meet weekly or once a year. Between meetings, people have experiences that impact how they are present to the group. At each meeting, people need to greet each other again and check in to re-establish trust. Depending on the setting, this can be easy or hard.

Trust is also built by a track record of doing tasks well, treating each other respectfully, solving problems, holding focus, and moving forward to carry out intent. People are energized by accomplishing what they have agreed to do; they're energized by successful problem solving, conflict resolution, defined focus, and action. People are energized by each other's stories and ability to understand one another in renewed ways

Stage 2: Carrying out intent

Intent needs to be acknowledged on a meeting-by-meeting basis. Deviation from intent needs to be discussed and negotiated.

Carrying out intent is an exhilarating phase of the circle's life. Group process is carried along by its own momentum. The circle's experience of success is a combination of the respect with which you treat each other and the accomplishment of tangible, concrete, and measurable goals. While carrying out intent, a new set of questions arises:

- How will you know when your circle's overall intent has been met?
- What reasonable goal or outcome could you establish for this meeting that will move you toward meeting your circle's overall intent? (This is a good check-in question.)
- Does leadership and responsibility feel balanced during this "work phase" of the circle?
- Are your personal priorities and circle priorities still aligned?

- Has your understanding changed? Has the group's understanding of itself changed?
- What's exciting about all of this? What's making you tense?

Accomplishing intent brings with it stress, excitement, celebration, and group cohesion. This is the circle at its greatest triumph: working collaboratively together, building a sense of comradeship in the accomplishment of clearly defined tasks.

Stage 3: Recommitting

Soon after accomplishing intent, there is often a period of acknowledging that something has been completed and an absence of direction: Now what? Recommitting can be a vulnerable time in the course of a circle meeting or in the lifespan of the circle itself. The drive to fulfill purpose may still be running high, or there may be a letdown in energy after an event has occurred or a goal has been reached.

This is a time when some people may want to leave the circle: their direction or priorities have taken them elsewhere, they need to move on, commitments have changed, personality clashes have developed, or someone wants to start another circle. This is a time when others may want to define a new purpose and pursue the next accomplishment. It's helpful if each member can be clear and not unduly influenced by others or by their own nostalgic attachments to this circle.

Here are some questions for participants to consider at this stage:

- What do you really want to do?
- What is your energy and time commitment now?
- What will the circle do next time it gathers?
- Do you want to take on another task?
- Do you want to go? Do you want to stay? Are there others who want to join?

However the circle proceeds — toward the next meeting or toward the next cycle of commitment — new intention needs to be set. Recommitting is a literal process. It draws the circle back to reshape, redirect, and restate its collective energy. This is a time when people need to step forward again, take on responsibilities, or shift their role and relationship to the group. It's a time for careful, openhearted listening.

In circle, energy is an invisible, working member of the group. When recommitting, pay attention to this energy: notice it within and around

you. People may not talk about energy, but we all experience this ineffable quality that holds a group together or shakes a group's confidence in itself.

(For more information about the role that energy plays in a group, see the Kindle booklet [*Understanding Energetics in Circles and Groups.*](#))

Stage 4: Letting go

No matter how dynamic and successful a circle is at continuing to find purpose, and no matter how committed its members are, there will most likely come a time to acknowledge the closing of the cycle. There are circles that meet for a week — such as seminars and annual gatherings. Others meet for a few months — such as task forces and planning groups. Some circles meet for years — book clubs, social action or environmental groups, circles of friends.

Letting go is a time of grief and celebration. A dynamic circle is a significant presence in the life of each member. Prepare for grief, expect it, talk about it in circle, have the courage to say goodbye in whatever ways fit you and the circle. In ordinary settings, or during times of celebration, people may forget that grief will also be present. Monitor sudden impulses toward irritation or withdrawal and ask yourself if grief is perhaps the real emotion.

Whether it's the end of one meeting or a long-term experience, a bit of ceremony helps with letting go and provides a way to handle emotions. You will have developed bits of ceremony that work for you: shared phrases, gestures, rituals or signals that open and close the meetings. Leave-taking needs to be acknowledged, so that everyone knows when the meeting is over or when the circle is complete.

If the circle itself is ending, there are practical details and agreements that help balance the heart energy.

- What conversation do we need to have to honor the group?
- What do we want to do with the artifacts created: the logbook, the center objects, and other tangible records of our experience?
- What agreements of confidentiality do we still want observed?
- How does each member respect the learning process here?
- Is there a ritual for closing that we want to design?
- What are the friendships, or potential friendships, we've discovered, and what arrangements do we want to make for meeting outside the circle?

A spark is lit. A fire ignites. People gather round and inspire each other with ideas, surprise each other with creativity and wisdom. They do things together that are based on these deep conversations and what they are learning about their own empowerment. Good things happen—inside and out. The flames flicker. There is no more kindling. The embers glow. The center is still warm. We carefully douse the ashes, turn our backs, and walk on, together and apart.

And so it has always been.

There is a grief that comes from fulfillment, just as there is a grief that comes from loss. Be prepared to be both sad and joyous. You have a new life skill: you know how to call and hold a circle.

What intention will you call a circle for next?

About this booklet

This guide is one of several booklets that introduces or expounds on specific applications and aspects of The Circle Way. The other booklets in this series are:

- *Understanding Energetics in Circles and Groups* by Cheryl Conklin and Ann Linnea
- *Understanding Shadow and Projection in Circles and Groups* by Meredith Jordan and Christina Baldwin
- *The Circle Way for Proactive Aging: A Harvest of Years* by Cynthia Trenshaw
- *The Circle Way for Nursing Leadership: A Model for Conversation and Shared Leadership in the Workplace* by Pamela Austin Thompson and Christina Baldwin
- *The Circle Way for Communities of Faith*: Ivy Thomas

The complete vision and model of The Circle Way is presented in:

- *Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture* by Christina Baldwin
- *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair* by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea

About the authors



Christina Baldwin

For forty years, Christina has been fascinated with the ways that narrative shapes life. Her books are an exploration of belief in the power of language. They 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 more of those energies within her own community. She continues to teach her classic seminar, *The Self as the Source of the Story*, and to focus on her own writing projects. She can be reached through PeerSpirit.com.



Ann Linnea

Ann Linnea is a life-long naturalist and wilderness guide. As co-founder of The Circle Way, she led the related outdoor adventure programs and has also been an indoor guide of circle practice. Ann co-authored an award-winning book that teaches environmental appreciation to children. (*Teaching Kids to Love the*

Earth). After a 65-day paddle around the circumference of Lake Superior, she wrote a deeply moving memoir of the journey titled *Deep Water Passage, a Spiritual Journey at Midlife*. In 2010, she co-authored *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* with Christina Baldwin. That year, her full-color *Keepers of the Trees: A Guide to Re-Greening North America* was also published.

She makes her home on an island in Puget Sound where she focuses her energies on environmental activism, nurturing the next generations of earth stewards, and being a “nature granny” to her grandchildren. She can be reached through PeerSpirit.com.

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, in addition to the indigenous heritage that has survived around the world.

The Circle Way was conceptualized by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, who offer this body of work as a gift to many cultures, with hopes that it will come to represent a standard of conduct inside which people may trust that certain guidelines and principles are understood and applied. They 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.

Circling is a growing revival and many similarities exist in how people are bringing it back into mainstream culture. Within the generic language used to reintroduce the circle, The Circle Way offers specific contributions that we hope, as a matter of courtesy, will be referenced and credited.

These contributions include the:

- Components of circle (and the components wheel that illustrates them)
- Three principles of circle
- Three practices of circle
- Agreements of circling, when they are used verbatim
- Description of this modality as “The Circle Way”
- Use and practice of a rotating guardian

More information

The Circle Way is a movement dedicated to re-introducing and supporting the use of circle in a global culture of conversation. 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, visit our website: thecircleway.net

