

## ***The Process Circle***

*A Small Group Method for Promoting Awareness and Alignment in the Helping Relationship*

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*Psychotherapists are merely dabbling in shamanism.  
— a Peruvian shaman*

Over the last few years I have developed cooperatively with several groups a way of working which derives from the Native American healing circle and the awareness-based practice of core process psychotherapy. I have called it the 'process circle', and it is proving to be an excellent training tool for working with people, both one-to-one and one-to-group. In a modest and yet exciting way, it represents a merging of Buddhist 'mindfulness' and the medicine wheel, which provides the potential for working both therapeutically and with the heightened

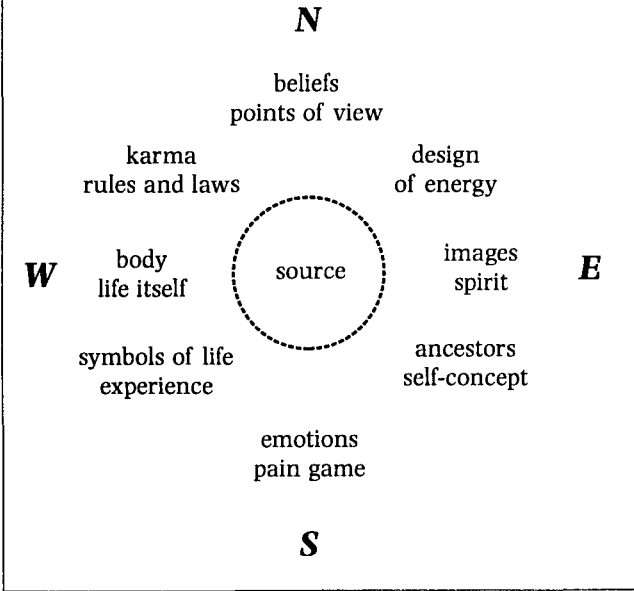
awareness which comes from aligning with Spirit.

Mindfulness is about attending to what is happening in the present moment without altering or distorting it. By staying with 'what is', something else arises. By attending enough, we can drop through our conditioning and experience what is arising from our core or source.

The healing circle draws on the star maiden's circle, a 'key' medicine wheel, which provides a map of how we become conditioned. Each direction on an imagined compass influences us with a

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## Star Maiden's Circle



son in the middle. (The diagram shows all these positions, which correspond to the star maiden's circle.)

Healing circles seem to serve at least two functions. Firstly, the client gets feedback on dimensions of themselves of which they may be unaware. Secondly, the healer, or shaman, is able to call on or consult energies or dimensions that extend beyond normal waking states of consciousness. In other words the field of potential awareness is larger than it might be if there were only

particular quality. Simply stated, attending to the influences within the circle expands our horizons of 'what is'.

So not only is our experience of the world potentially deeper than we imagine, it is wider too.

What seems to distinguish shamanic healing from conventional psychotherapy, in the context of a healing circle, is the way in which the shaman acts as a 'choreographer of energies'. The 'client' is in the middle of a circle of people, each of whom holds awareness of an aspect of that person. So one person will attend to what they are aware of at the level of the body, another will attend to the emotions or place of the child, another to what the ancestors are saying, another to what is happening with the energy in the room, and so on. In this way the group as a whole operates as a hologram of the per-

two people involved in the healing relationship. There is a focusing of wider energies. For the people sitting around the circle there is the benefit of only having to attend to one aspect of the person. If I am sitting in the west, then all I have to attend to is body. I do not have to be concerned about anything else. I can also give myself permission to voice seemingly irrelevant or inconsequential sensations of which I may become aware, because they may contribute to the whole picture. And if they do not, then it does not matter, because they are only likely to distort the picture minimally, if at all. The hologram evens out distortions.

Something rather special seems to happen at these healings. The boundaries between individuals become diffused. A sense of connectedness develops. There is synergy and a sense of something greater

than ourselves in the room. As the recipient of this kind of healing, I have had a strong sense of seeing many-faceted reflections of myself as an individual in a context that is wider than my usual perception. There is also something useful, I believe, about the disciplined way in which each person 'holds' a direction. The sense of ceremony brought to the healing gives a sense of honouring the person in the middle, and this in turn gives them an extra feeling of support, responsibility and motivation for engaging with themselves.

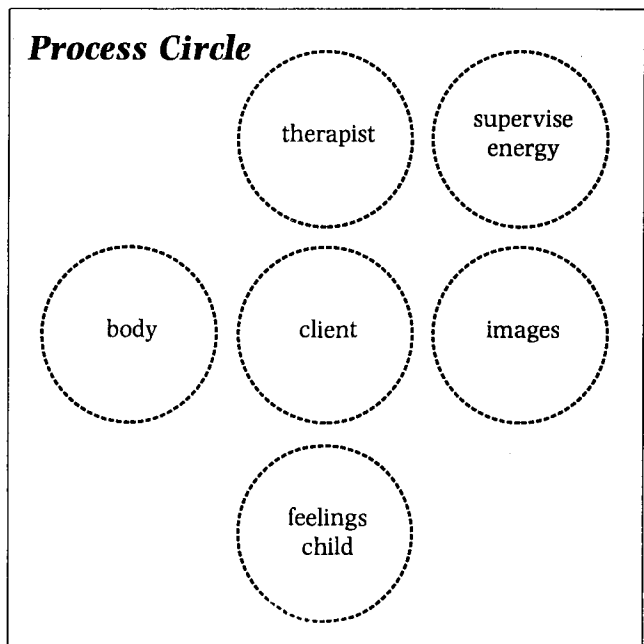
The process circle derives from the healing circle and works like this:

The client takes up a position in the centre, facing the therapist who is in the north. The client is free to use the session in any way they wish.

The therapist engages in heart to heart communication with the client, simply attending to what is happening in the present moment. (The north is incidentally the position of heart-to-heart communication and of the fourth, or heart, chakra in the Native American system.) The therapist may ask, 'What is happening for you now?' and 'How is that for you?' In other words, they focus on the now and the how. They can also ask what is happening for anyone sitting around the circle, and are free to confer with their supervisor/support person in the north east.

The person in the south

holds the position of the client's feelings, and also the place of their child. (Sitting behind the client they are doing this in a very real way. In the Native American teachings this is the place of the client's child shield, the portion of their energy field that perceives the world from the perspective of the child.) In that position, south will attend to what is happening at the level of feelings. They may pick up what is happening emotionally for the client, or they may notice their own emotional responses. When they are sufficiently clear what their response is, they communicate this into the circle. They communicate their feelings rather in the spirit of psychodrama's doubling technique. So they might say: 'I'm feeling sad right now', and the client can accept that as an accurate reflection of what is happening for them, or reject it as a



projection. It is up to the client. South communicates the object of their awareness in the spirit of an offering.

The people holding the positions of the body in the west, and images in the east, do the same thing. So body attends to sensations. They may be responding to the client at a body level, or they may be resonating at a body level with the body of the client. When they are sufficiently clear about what their response is, they communicate this into the centre. An example of a response might be: 'I'm getting a tightness around my shoulders and chest', or 'I'm getting drowsy and my body wants to slump'. If they are not feeling anything or are unclear, then they can communicate that.

Body may also feel it appropriate to make physical contact with the client and can check this out with them. Alternatively the client can request it.

The person in the east attends to what is happening at the level of images. No matter how seemingly irrelevant or bizarre, they communicate what they are getting into the circle. So the client might be talking about their relationship with their father, and east might say 'I'm getting a bear shaking a tree'. This will either be east's own material — in which case the client can ignore it, or it may be relevant for them. It never fails to surprise me (and clients) how these images can be highly relevant — often quite magically so.

The person in the north east attends to the energy of the whole group and also acts as a supervisor and support person for the therapist. If they feel that too much information is forthcoming, they can ask people to ease off.

My experience — with more than seventy people — has confirmed the value of the process circle. Clients report feeling contained, supported, seen. The effect of the circle is to provide a boundary that is resonating at many levels with the client's experience. Trainee therapists and facilitators say they too feel supported, and that they do not have to bear all the responsibility of 'getting it right' for the client. The other members of the circle say it helps to have to focus on just one aspect of the client.

One person saw how the ideal therapist would be able to operate from all positions on the circle, resonating with all aspects of the client. So one benefit of the method is that it breaks down into manageable bits the areas of the client's experience to which a therapist might attend. If I am in the west, I only attend to the body, and so on. When I am at ease with attending to all the elements, I can put it all together and attend to the whole spectrum of the client's, and my own, experience. In this way the circle has the potential for becoming a forum for the building blocks of awareness.

But there is another level at which the method is effective. By 'holding the directions' on the circle, the group is aligning itself with the energies or qualities of those directions. It does not seem to matter whether or not people actually believe this, because something happens anyway. Something happens which is greater than the collective awareness of the individuals comprising the group. All the groups I have worked with have noticed this. Most people say that it seems to be 'powerful' and 'magical'. The group becomes aligned with Spirit.