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SHARING CIRCLES AS HEALING SPACES: AN ODE

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PROLOGUE

Since time immemorial our hunter-gatherer ancestors have held council with ritual regularity.[1] Democratically, they sat in a circle, talked respectfully in turn, and grieved and rejoiced in song and dance. Consciously coming together every few days was an ineluctable rhythm of the symphony of necessarily interdependent lives.

To participate in a sharing circle with reliable frequency honours our longing to be seen in our suffering and our joy, and our needs for belonging, understanding and compassion. A sharing circle is above all a safe space of connection with ourselves and others. Safety is supported by confidentiality, being listened to without interruption, and the shared intention to not be judgemental towards what arises in our own or others' minds.

Sadly, modern lives are marked by disconnection. Our memories of a pre-agricultural life in small clans woven into the ecosystem have faded. Our self-image, especially in the West, is that of the individual: separate from others and the universe, and thus ultimately alone with our feelings and thoughts. Cultural norms and edifices of law and morality concretise individualism and promote atomisation and interpersonal disconnection.

Labouring under a misapprehension of individual control, we see ourselves at once as almighty gods authoring personal destinies, and devils deserving righteous self-contempt for perceived misdeeds. We learn to thus judge ourselves as good or bad. In addition, for many of us adverse childhood experiences or trauma in this or previous generations contributes to an inner world that feels unsafe. As far as we judge or turn away from the unwanted within, we are disconnected from ourselves.

Moreover, many of us live and work in boxy urban architecture bereft of softness and warmth. Solace in the natural world is tinged with shame, seeing that we are burning our forest home knowingly. We are also disconnected from nature.

The more vulnerable among us - of a sensitive temperament or exposed to trauma or social disadvantage - are burdened by a skyrocketing rate of psychosomatic distress. Mainstream medicine defines depressions and anxieties as categories of illness leaving sufferers to see themselves as personally disordered. It fails largely to acknowledge or address how our multimodal disconnection plays a key role in the onset and maintenance of distress.

The rest of us, unless in deep denial or distraction, suffer at least some measure of anomie. Primates needing to belong, we may fall for tribalism: racial, religious, ideologic or conspiratorial. Institutional and cultural norms that hold us in civility seem outdated or impotent in the face of polarising social media algorithms.

Where and how do we begin to reconnect: with our own hearts, our togetherness, and our environment? Returning to the practice of a regular non-hierarchical gathering with compassionate intention may help. In mental health care we encourage healthy lifestyle, psychotherapies, and medications. It behoves us to also recommend participation in a sharing circle: a practice that may benefit not only patients but the community at large.

INVITATION

Dear Reader,

Below, two healthcare workers come together in an archetypal mentorship relationship modelling the felt emotional presence and interpersonal safety of a sharing circle. They explore the what, why and how of such gatherings as a path to reconnection.

Before you read further and if it feels safe enough, spend a moment in self-connection. Breathe a few breaths. Rest your attention on how you feel in your body right now. Do so in a caring and relaxed

manner to create a safe inner circle for all parts of you, even those that you find unpleasant.

Now stay connected to how you feel as you read on. Ideas are presented in the form of a dialogue that aims to engage your inner world of feelings and longings directly. You may reflect and analyse later. For now, simply let the words wash over and percolate through you as an experience of felt reconnection.

DIALOGUE

Circle of two in trusting safety

Young mental health professional (Y): Arriving in this space of support and learning, I know I can be safely myself. I feel relaxed.

Mentor (M): I am in touch with a wish that you be well, and excited, anticipating co-inspiration.

All need healing

Y: Most of my patients suffer similarly. They were born with a sensitive temperament to disadvantaged, traumatised, or simply over-stressed parents. As children met too often with overwhelm and rejection instead of unconditional love, they were wounded and became rejecting of and thus disconnected from parts of themselves. This is such a common constellation of experiences, I can to some degree relate to it in myself.

M: To be human is to hurt. We are less healers of others, than companions in the longing to heal. We are all *patients*, literally "those who suffer".

Individual care is limiting

Y: Exercise, walks in nature, good sleep and food can help. Friends and mentors can help. Support in standing up to addictions can help. Talking or body-oriented psychotherapy can help. Medications can help.

M: Yet individual care within the zeitgeist of *individualism* though is fraught.

Y: Reminds me of how we are taught to speak of patients in healthcare as, "clients" or "consumers".

M: The individual "consumer" remains, in our mind and theirs, forever a separate entity. Their lives as social beings, or their sense of place in relation to existence at large is largely ignored. Individual care is care/less about our ineluctable interwovenness with our context.

Y: Hm... I understand. A basic problem we have is our view of ourselves as separate from others and nature at large. That we have such a view at all or that we suffer because of this is largely unseen by us. When we restrict our view and approach in healthcare to assessing and treating individuals separately, we subtly become part of the problem.

Disconnection in three modes

M: Comparing, competing, and transacting within the individualist view, we forget that we exist not only as persons *in* but also as collectives. We feel smaller, weaker and suffer an insidious background loneliness when we experience ourselves purely as individuals. We suffer interpersonal disconnection.

We forget also that we are animals whose existence and wellbeing is inseparable from that of the natural world. We misthink nature as *out there*, and blithely exploit her. We suffer from a disconnection from nature, and thereby disavow and destroy a part of ourselves.

And it all begins inside, when we judge our anxious inner child as weak, or the anger we carry over from childhood as wrong. Rejecting parts of us as unworthy to belong, we are strangers in our own inner homes. We suffer self-disconnection.

Everybody needs a group

Interpersonally, we long to *always* belong and unquestioningly belong; to be seen in how we feel and what we need; and to feel safe from being judged as good or bad, and the attendant threat of being cast out.

Even with loving friends and family we may not feel as though we are part of the community, nor be in touch with the common humanity we share with all people. Being a member of a group who offers communal caring presence can reconnect us.

Y: In my weekly mindfulness practice group we have a sharing circle. Curiously, I can more easily open up about my fear, shame, or anger with them - some of whom I've never seen before and may never see again - than to friends and family. I feel safe, because I know: if they are there, they share the aspiration to be compassionately aware; they won't interrupt me when I speak; they won't raise an eyebrow or smirk in judgement or disdain; nor will they tell me what to do, as if they knew better.

I guess Alcoholics Anonymous, or a peer support group for people with cancer or anxiety, or the circles in the contemplative prayer or Quaker communities are similar.

M: Most schools of self-development or spiritual care include some form of formal group exchange.

Y: What is common about how this is held in these different communities?

What does it take to have a sharing circle?

M: To safely and sustainably meet our needs for belonging and connection, and to generate a collective healing energy a certain physical and temporal form is required:

1. The circle shape allows all to meet each other's eyes and sense the communal felt energy.
2. A consistent comfortable space in nature or a good-sized pleasant room for 5 to 20 people works well. This number balances the collective capacity to listen with intimacy.
3. The weekly rhythm is an outlet for past pains and grievances and gives a boost of strength for the days to come.
4. Sufficient time is needed for the likely number of participants, so that all may have a few minutes to share if they so wish.

The sharing itself also needs a form:

1. We have the floor when we speak. Knowing that no one will speak until we are done, helps us feel safe as we open our hearts in vulnerability.
2. We aim to share for only so long as to allow everyone to have a voice.
3. The beginning and end of speech is marked with a gesture, sound or phrase agreed upon in advance. We all take a breath after each person has shared. The clear framing and the pause help us relax and share from a place of inner presence.
4. We are free to share *or* to keep silent during each meeting.
5. What feels most alive and seeks a voice in the moment is our gift to each other. Though there may be a theme, like in AA, whatever feelings press to be seen that day are given priority.
6. We don't seek or give advice. There is safety in laying bare our hearts and being simply heard and held. Each member speaks only of *their own* tender moment-to-moment truth, even if it's a feeling aroused by what has been shared.
7. Rituals that open and close the circle recall the intention and the form, create sacred space, and contain and carry the group: an inspiring text for instance; some time in silent kind awareness of sensations in the body; or a reading out of why and how we mean to be there.
8. This is not group therapy. There is no expert, nor are we there to be fixed. We meet in our wholeness, with the circle a symbol thereof. A rotating roster of peer-facilitators hold space, and may also share like others, eschewing hierarchy.

And we generate an atmosphere of closeness, trust, and safety through:

1. Knowing that our hearts' secrets are held in confidence by the group and the well-meaning intention that brings us together.

2. We sit with the sole intent that we may all enjoy the most wellbeing our inner and outer circumstances allow.
3. We aspire to speak of and listen for our *feelings and longings*. The intellect has its place elsewhere.
4. We notice and let go of resistance to the feelings that are present.
5. Here is a space for us to rejoice in and savour the good; to mourn longings left unfulfilled; and to hold in compassion our fear, despair or pique.

Sharing circles can help reconnect us within and without

Y: In this way we can heal our interpersonal disconnection, but how can we feel reconnected with ourselves?

M: We need to belong, as do those unwanted parts of us we label as bad and reject or try to ignore. As we are seen without judgement in our vulnerability and imperfection, we learn to connect better to ourselves in our wholeness. We become better able to consciously feel our unwanted feelings or have the thoughts and urges we are ashamed of arise without denial or rejection.

Y: And what of our sense of separation from the natural world?

M: Our needs for water, food, shelter, safety, connection and so on are expressions of living organisms' life-supporting principle or energy. Sensing how the one life energy animates us all in the circle, helps us also regain our felt connection with non-human life forms.

In fact, feeling at one with others and whole within can be a doorway to a felt knowing of our inherent interpenetrated interbeing with *all things*. We may then glimpse how as vibrating atoms of the totality we are in a ceaseless dance with nature as a whole. "To be means to inter-be. A flower has to inter-be – with the sunshine, the cloud, with everything else. She doesn't have a separate existence." [2]

Sharing circles at work

Y: I wish we sat in such a circle once a week at work too. "Reflective practice" ought to be the norm, but the workload crowds the schedule, and many wish to mask their feelings at work.

M: In the long term, we work best through harmony and camaraderie. Fearing burnout, I first started such a circle for staff working in a beyond busy acute inpatient psychiatric unit. Bearing witness to how we felt uplifted and gave us strength. The chance to pause and take a breath helped us clear our minds. Trust and goodwill were nourished, and we had more of a sense of "we're in this together", almost as friends. We could then prioritise and share the workload better.

The approach to bringing staff together must be gentle and slow especially in the face of negative group dynamics or where members are dissatisfied with teamwork. Some need time to trust the circle space. Others may simply not be open to the invitation to emotional exchange. There may be a healthy boundary there to be respected.

Beginning at home

Y: OK, so how would I start a circle?

M: The safety of the circle begins in one's own inner life. For instance, I sit in caring presence with my own feelings a little every day. In outer life, I participate in a group with others who wish to heal and grow once or twice a week. In this way I learn hands-on about holding space.

I suggest letting the inspiration to start a circle yourself arise naturally. Because you've been in them, and they've helped, you may be moved to start one, for example: for colleagues or patients, or in your community. I would begin with personal conversations, describing the why and the what and building trust. The more people feel safe with you, and sense that you are safe in yourself, the more likely their interest will be piqued.

A taste of the challenges

Y: What if fear, hurt or hate rises in us or is triggered by what others say as we open to ourselves?

M: For all those who take this path, a map is required. Non-violent communication[3], mindfulness[4], self-compassion[5], and internal family systems[6] are my complementary maps. For the first few weeks some training in how to hold space and be in healing dialogue may be required.[7] Gradually the facilitator can step back and members themselves take turns to lead the group.

We learn to *allow* rather than force our hearts to open. We learn a dance of taking care of ourselves, even as we are taken care of by the group. In holding space for others, we find the strength that holds our feelings too.

Alone, we may forget ourselves in an other- or self-rejecting vicious circle of denigrating thoughts and contemptuous feelings. As a collective, it is easier to relax into and communicate from our inherently well-meaning core.

Y: What about the extraverts who want to take over, or those who may lean the group towards extremist thought?

M: The rituals and ground rules remind members to be equitable, to stay with their feelings, and to not veer into ideology. The one who leads the meeting takes some responsibility that participants honour the intentions of the space. Interestingly, facilitator intervention is rarely required.

Most circles tend to self-regulate.

We meet in circle to gather strength and inspiration to fully meet others and the world, not to escape into an opinion enclave. We are there to nourish connectedness. Divisive thinking disconnects us.

The form and intention that guide sharing are designed to counter polarisation and tribalism as we learn to allow for each other's views. The basic premise is that all people share the same common range of feelings and needs. As mammals we all need safety and feel afraid when perceiving a threat, for instance. Others may live in a different information universe and may see threats where we don't or think of different solutions than we would.

How can we respectfully agree to disagree where *opinions* are concerned, while anchored in mutual compassion for how we *feel* and what we *need*? This is a great challenge of our time.

We evolved not purely as individuals but as competing clans. The resource landscape and our ability to exhaust it has changed through technology, overpopulation, and globalisation. No longer may any one group benefit in the long term from tribalism. We must recognise that we are all now the one clan. Thriving into the future necessitates actively favouring cooperation in a spirit of kinship with the natural world. We learn in the sharing circle to dialogue in a way that unites us in what we all have in common as a basis for finding solutions cooperatively.

EPILOGUE

We send the person with an addiction, the bereaved, or the ill to support groups, lest they suffer alone. Yet to the degree that we are disconnected from the non-human natural world or intra- or interpersonally, we may all feel like we are ultimately alone: lone rangers *in* or *set against*, but not *of* the world.

The ancient practice of the sharing circle, preserved in spiritual, self-development and peer support traditions, enables us to reconnect with our collective identity. In seeing that others in the circle feel hurt and need respect, *just like us*, we sense that we are not so different from them. As we become fully conscious of how sensitively we are affected by each other, we feel in our depths the interdependence of our wellbeing.

Sitting in circle invites us to find our own centre. As if entrained by the beat of a common, caring heart, we are more aligned with the wisdom and compassion in our body and mind. The circle models and fosters the safety and inclusion we need inside.

As our self-experience broadens and softens, we come to embody our exosystemic selves more and more. We may then hold in awe, and together honour and treat as sacred, our fragile earthly mother and home. Let us begin with safe and caring spaces for dialogue. ■

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