

Talking Circles to Deepen Communication

One of the Aboriginal traditions is something called the Talking Circle. It can be a strong healing agent and skill-builder for people. It can be used among friends, in school situations, and particularly in families and support groups.

Aboriginal people communicate differently. Conversations among non-Aboriginal cultures are often a competitive sport. If there are several people together, the strongest conversational competitor will win out, dominating the conversation and often the group; the weakest may not be heard from at all.

Aboriginal culture values cooperation over competition and this is reflected in virtually every aspect of their lives and lifestyles. Many Aboriginals engage in conversation quite differently from the "competitive style": they listen, usually looking down and not establishing eye contact, until the person speaking is completely finished. Then they talk, and they fully expect to be able to completely finish their thought before they'll be interrupted or the conversation goes off to another person.

This style of conversation is fully expressed in the Talking Circle. In this conversational situation, a sacred object such as a carved stick, feather, stone or something else meaningful is passed around the circle in a clockwise direction.

The "rules" for the Talking Circles:

1. The person holding the object is the only one with the right to speak, even if s/he takes a long time to think about what to say and there's a pause in the conversation.
2. If somebody else in the circle wants to comment on what's being said, those comments are limited to noises which can be made through the nose, usually just a soft grunt of agreement. Negative comments are strongly discouraged or outright banned. Otherwise, each person must wait her or his turn.
3. When the object comes to you, you may talk about "whatever is in your heart." In other words, while there may be an overall topic that the Talking Circle is centered around, conversation is by no means limited to this. A person is absolutely free to say whatever is in their heart, without limitation, and in the safe and comfortable knowledge that nobody will criticize it or interrupt it.
4. If a person talks on overlong, people around the circle begin to discreetly cough. "Overlong" is usually defined according to the situation, but could be three minutes to ten minutes, depending on the size of the group, the topic, and how long the group wants to spend together. If you have the object and notice that others are coughing, it's time to pass it along. (Use of a timer or gong would be highly inappropriate for a Talking Circle, as it's an artificial imposition on the organic process of the Circle.)
5. The circle goes around and around either until everybody has had one opportunity to talk (usually in a larger group with time constraints) or until each person, when they receive the object, expresses the feeling that they've pretty much said everything they have to say. It's interesting to see how this works: the process is usually quite organic, and everybody pretty much "winds down" about the same time.

Talking Circles are healing, and extraordinarily effective ways of bringing everybody into the process of communication and group life. Because you can't speak until you have the object, the skills of listening carefully and learning how to remember what you want to say when your time comes are developed and exercised.

Talking Circles have a powerful impact on groups of adults and youth. Invite friends over to do them, as if they were a parlor game. ("Come on over to our house for dinner and one-hour Talking Circle!") I recommend you try one out a few times with your friends or family.