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**INTRODUCTION TO THE
THE PRACTICE OF COUNCIL**

THE PRACTICE OF COUNCIL

Introduction

Have you ever noticed what happens when you really listen to another person or to a creature rustling in the brush at night or the wind moving in the trees, listen without reacting or even the intention to respond, listen without being influenced by long-held images and memories or firmly held positions, listen instead with a beginners mind and the ears of a child hearing a bedtime story?

Most of us rarely listen that way. In ordinary dialog or group discussion our response usually begins to form well before others are finished speaking. Even in nature's indomitable presence, a self-involved mind will veil the ears (and the eyes as well) from what is actually happening around us.

It has not always been that way. Not too long ago, before our ears became accustomed to an increasing barrage of stimulation, many people knew how to listen attentively from a state of stillness, for example, while tracking an animal or hearing the approach of rain - or sitting in Council with a group of similarly intentioned peers. When we are graced with that kind of listening and devoted to its practice, our ability to be empathic grows, we enter a world of spontaneous self-discovery and ultimately come to recognize our inseparable connection to all forms of life. In short, as a Quaker might say, 'When we listen devoutly, the heart opens.'

Those of us fortunate enough to be told stories when we were young know about such transformations of the heart, for storytelling has been one of the surest paths to communion among humans since the creation of language. It is not surprising that Jesus found parables the most effective way to share his teachings and admonished his followers to "Come unto me as a child." When listening to stories, the child within awakens and leads us towards an organic state of wholeness in which the

illusion of boundaries separating mind, body and spirit can be dispelled. In earth-cherishing cultures, this experience of wholeness is maintained largely through the telling of stories that renew contact with tribal Gods, demons and ways of being initiated into community.

More recently, our scientific understanding of the listening process has grown considerably. Contemporary physiological studies reveal a fundamental connection between the receptive mechanisms of the ear and stimulation of the learning and imaginative centers in the brain. For example, the French physician Tomatis^{1*} describes how the sense of Self begins in the womb with the development of the auditory system at four months. Primary initiation is through the sounds of the mother, particularly those generated by her singing or telling stories to her unborn child. He finds that after birth the child's capabilities and sense of wellbeing deepens in proportion to the individual's ability to bring his or her hearing process into a condition of rapt attention, most importantly in regard to the mother. Tomatis suggests that the sound of the mother's voice 'in utero' becomes a (mostly unconscious) beacon for us the rest of our lives. In cultures where it is traditional for women to sing and tell stories to their unborn babies, the children appear to be relatively well adjusted and free of anxiety. His work implies that giving full attention while listening - as distinct from just hearing - is fundamental to creative and spiritual awakening.

We know of no more effective way to invoke this state of listening than in what we have come to call the "Council Process" that has been practiced these past ten years both at The Ojai Foundation and in "The Mysteries Program" for elementary and secondary schools. The origin of this process can be traced to the League of the Iroquois, which had a powerful influence on the beginnings of our present governmental system, and the Peoples of the Plains and Southwestern Pueblos. More recently, the traditional practice of Council has emerged in contemporary form through the Native American Church. The roots of Council also can be found in classical Greek culture from no less prominent a source than Homer's *Iliad*.^{2*} Since 1979, we have integrated these traditional Council practices with contemporary techniques for clarifying and enhancing group dynamics.

In recent years, Council is being used increasingly in a variety of settings such as intentional communities, schools, families and in the business world as well. It has provided a timely context for exploring differences without the pressure for agreement or even consensus. The underlying intention of Council moves us towards a partnership model for action, rather than one based on the hierarchy of dominance. It helps a group to build a state of interactive meditation in which sensitivity, patience and spontaneous compassion are encouraged. In Council we learn how to release the personal sense of having to "do it all," without

^{1*} About the Tomatis Method, Edited by Gilmore, Madaule and Thompson, The Listening Center Press, 1989.

^{2*} For example, see The Anger of Achilles: Homer's Iliad, Translated by Robert Graves, Doubleday, 1959. The opening scene (p 44) of Graves' retelling of the story includes a Council in which a "gold-studded wand" was used in an attempt to resolve the bitter dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon.

abdicating our individual responsibility or power to initiate.

We offer this brief introduction to Council in the spirit of supporting the further emergence of this important form of communication. Although our primary emphasis will be on the use of Council in communities and schools, it is important to point out how useful this practice has been in other contexts as well. For example, one of us participated in a weekly family Council for many years that involved husband, wife and two children. These Councils offered enumerable opportunities for the children to empower themselves and the adults to shed their parental roles in open exchanges of feelings about important family interactions and issues. The regular practice of Council in primary relationships (“Dyadic Council”) has also proven to be a useful practice for many couples.

Council has found its way into the business community as an alternative to meetings whose underlying dynamics are dominated by the usual rigid hierarchical patterns of authority. Using Council for a brainstorming session, for example, stimulates the creativity of all participants, even those who would be intimidated in that more familiar setting.

At The Ojai Foundation, Council has become the primary practice supporting group interaction, conflict resolution, story telling, decision making and co-visioning. It provides a primary tool for building community and, along with Mindfulness practice, forms the core of The Foundation School curriculum. The authors have been conducting basic and advanced Council trainings at The Foundation for several years.

The Mysteries Program for elementary and secondary school students that has been developed in several Southern California Schools (notably Crossroads, Palms Middle School and the Happy Valley School in Ojai) uses Council as its basic format in exploring values, family relationships, sexuality, drug abuse and other important topics. This program includes the use of guided imagery, meditation, journal writing, articulation of one’s personal mythology, creation of ceremonies (for example, those honoring such transitions as the separation of seniors from home and high school), and music making - particularly the drumming and chanting that is such an integral part of the shamanic tradition out of which Council originally arose.

The Elements of Council

As we have practiced it, the basic form of Council is simple. The group chooses one or two leaders or facilitators (“Road Chiefs” in the tradition of the Native American Church), whose job it is to keep the process on track. We have found that two

leaders, working as a pair, reinforces the feeling of partnership that underlies the Council Process (a man and woman creates a particularly rich balance).

In order to empower each person to speak in turn, a talking object or “stick” is chosen to pass around the circle — traditionally in the clockwise or “sun direction.” The stick can be as innocent as a flower just picked for the occasion or as venerable as a traditional handcrafted artifact familiar to the group. Many Councils that meet regularly use the same object repeatedly over a period of months or even years. In this case, the talking stick becomes a symbol of the group’s integrity and capability for spirited communication, and so can help empower the expressiveness of the individual who holds it. The group creates sometimes the talking object and augmented over a period of time, say with shells, beads, feathers or other mementos of group experiences. We remember a class of third graders that struggled for months unsuccessfully to bring life into their weekly Councils until it was suggested that the entire group make a talking stick from special objects each person brought to school. Creating their own “sacred” instrument was all they needed to breathe vitality, excitement and playfulness into their Council.

If possible a fire is built in the center of the circle or a candle lit to set the mood for storytelling and to remind everyone of the transformative possibilities inherent in Council. We have come to call this the “Children’s Fire,” through the Sundance teachings brought to The Ojai Foundation by Hyemeyohsts Storm. This central fire represents the human heart, particularly in regard to its ultimate potential for innocence. When we say, “Never cross the Children’s Fire,” we mean no one is to interrupt the person holding the talking stick (unless, as in the traditional Council, they want to express their approval by saying “Ho!”). Some combination of silence, drumming and prayer is a good way to prepare the circle for Council.

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“It’s my turn to be Council Chief,” Eric said excitedly as he reached for the talking stick wrapped in its red cloth covering.

“Then don’t forget to give the rules,” Carol whispered in his ear. “There are people here that have never been in Council before.”

“Okay,” Eric said, untying the leather thongs and exposing the long curving carob pod with its many beads and feathers. “This is the talking stick we’ve used since the beginning of third grade. It’s got all kinds of feathers and other stuff we’ve added, like this hawk feather I found when we were hiking at Rock Creek. And this shell -”

“You don’t have to tell the story of each thing,” Carol whispered.

“Shh,” Eric said, holding his finger to his lips. “I’m holding the stick! Anyway, there are three rules: speak honestly from the heart; be brief and...and -”

“And listen from the heart,” Carol offered

“Yeah, listen from the heart,” Eric smiled and blushed a little. “That’s the most important rule. Listen from the heart. Now today you can talk about anything you want, like stuff happening at home or a dream you had last night or boy and girl stuff - anything. Let’s see...I go first...Mmm...You know, I don’t have anything to say!” Everybody laughed as Eric handed the talking stick to Carol.

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Councils can be open or thematic, depending on the needs of the group. One way to get a good reading on how everybody is feeling is to call for an open Council: “Let’s start out today with a weather report,” Gigi began. “Just describe what’s going on for you right now - how you’re feeling and what you’ve been thinking about. Or tell us a story about something that just happened to you. And don’t forget, it’s always all right to be silent when you get the stick. Just hold it quietly for a moment to make sure there’s nothing that wants to be said before you pass it on.” David could hardly wait for the stick; he had been having a hard time at school for several days and needed to get a lot off his chest.

Even in an open Council a theme often emerges, perhaps triggered by one person’s story or the general movement of the sharing. Often several people in the circle find they are dealing with the same issue and the Council ends up focusing intensely on that topic. In a recent open women’s Council, for example, the third person to speak poured out a painful story of early sexual abuse. The remaining three hours of the Council were devoted entirely to this issue, with the result that many women felt a significant sense of release and healing.

Sometimes a theme is chosen for Council, particularly in a circle of young people or in a community setting where Council is practiced regularly. Posing themes in the form of questions usually stimulates responses that avoid a didactic or sermonizing tone. Asking for responses in the form of a story can help everyone in the circle to listen “like a child.”

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“There’s been a lot of ganging-up these past few weeks.” Jack spoke in a matter of fact tone as he unwrapped the talking stick. “Many of you have spoken to me about how upsetting it is, but you say you don’t know how to break the pattern. So, for today’s Council, I’d like to ask everyone to tell a story about a time - not necessarily recently - when you felt picked on. What was going on for you then and how did you feel? Or maybe a story about an occasion when you picked on someone. Tell us how you came to do that.”

“I’m, glad it’s my turn to be Council Chief this week,” Leon said staring at the rattle as he shook it slowly. “I’m really concerned about what’s happening in the community right now. We seem to resist any strong leadership when it arises but then complain that there’s no clear pattern of accountability or responsibility. I’d like tonight’s Council to be about leadership. How do we really feel we should govern ourselves or, better yet, how are we willing to be governed - if we are at all?”

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Setting the theme can be followed by a few moments of silence or some guided imagery to help make more direct contact with the material. In the training intensives, with a group that hasn’t worked together before, we usually ask for stories that accelerate the building of trust and familiarity:

“Tell us a story about your roots, where you came from, about your ancestors, your tribal origins. Maybe it’ll be a story about your grandmother or grandfather. Maybe it’ll be about a dream you had of another lifetime.”

“For this Council we’re going to ask you to remember a time when you realized - either with pleasure or horror or a mixture of both - that in some ways you’re just like your mother or father!”

“I know most of you don’t know each other at all. So to start off this weekend we’re going to tell stories about some event or pattern in our childhood that caused us a lot of embarrassment. Tell your story as if it were happening right before your eyes, now, without interpretation or analysis.”

The choice of themes depends on how the group process is unfolding and here is where the perceptive capability, intuition and playfulness of the Council leaders come into play. Ideally, the cues come from the group itself, not from the leaders’ preconceived ideas, no matter how experienced or wise the leaders may be. The success of Council depends on finding and enhancing the group direction or “group mind.” The leaders’ job is to serve the collective intelligence of the circle with imagination and wit, principally through their choice of what to share and the selection of themes. The leaders are always part

of the circle, never above or outside it, either in spirit or in form.

If the ground rules are stated clearly at the outset, it will be rarely necessary for the leaders to interrupt anyone, either because they're going on too long or the content of their sharing is inappropriate. When that becomes necessary, "gentle decisiveness" is the mark of a good Council leader. Openness and flexibility are also needed. Any member of the circle may consciously or unconsciously shift the theme or propose an entirely new course for the circle. The leaders should always consider the truth of the moment, whoever in the circle may be speaking it.

One of the great challenges in Council is to not to be thinking about what you're going to say until it's your turn to speak. Preparing your contribution before receiving the talking stick obviously diminishes its spontaneity and responsiveness to what others have contributed. Planning ahead hinders the weaving of Council's magical web. A good practice is to wait until the talking stick is in your hands and then pause to see what springs to mind. Often we are surprised then at the humor, tears, wisdom or vision that comes forth. Waiting for the talking stick, the fear of sharing in a group can dissipate or increase, depending on what finally needs to be spoken. Council offers the opportunity to experience our own and other's unpredictability - sometimes with startling results.

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"I had a whole plan of what I was going to say when this Council started," Elizabeth spoke in a voice shaky with feeling. "But what's been shared – particularly by you Sharon – makes me want to tell the circle something I've never said to this group before – or to any group for that matter. I can't believe I'm doing this..."

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As trust builds in the circle, the urge to go deeper and explore new ground brings life to Council. Before long we dare to express our spontaneous truth. If, because of the size of the circle or the theme, you have doubts about the content or extent of sharing, a few simple silent reflections can be useful: Will my speaking serve me? Will the circle or the community be served? Will the "bigger picture," Life, God... be served? When doubts remain, it is usually best to take the leap. Boldness is rarely inappropriate.

Each group must establish clear ground rules about confidentiality, particularly if the circle is going to meet regularly. Generally we have found that it is better not to discuss what has been shared in Council outside the circle, except perhaps in general terms. Thus a brief review of topics covered might be revealed, but comments such as, "You should have heard the

story John told about Cheryl. It seems she..." obviously risks the betrayal of trust. Even for two or more people within the circle, it is important to question whether further discussion outside of Council is appropriate, or whether it would be better to wait for the next gathering of the group.

In a school setting, the Council leaders may become privy to a sensitive situation concerning a particular student about which they feels the student's parents, school counselor or an administrator should be informed. In such cases, it is good practice for the leaders to urge the student (speaking to him several times if necessary, either alone or in Council) to communicate with the appropriate person on their own. If the student refuses, there may be situations when the leader feels action is necessary, but we have found this to be a rare occurrence and one, which should be shared with the Council or, at the very least, with the student involved before any further steps are taken.

Different Intentions, Different Forms

Council provides an excellent format for a deep exploration of values and for helping each individual get in touch with their undeniable or nonnegotiable assumptions.^{3*} In ordinary discussions these often deeply hidden assumptions can shape our reactivity and block the process of devout listening. The more our undeniable assumptions and strongly held values are threatened the less we really listen to the views of others. In Council, however, verbal reactivity is restrained by the patient silence that is an integral part of the process. Then, as we become accomplished in the practice of devout listening, the attitudes and positions of others can be heard free of the blocking that results from repeatedly affirming our own point of view (as in ordinary argumentative discussion). When we can hear another's undeniable assumptions without reaction, our own most fundamental values and attitudes - even those of which we have been only remotely aware - slowly emerge from hiding and become available for conscious exploration. We then have the opportunity to make one of several choices: affirm what we have been tenaciously holding on to all along - now, at least, more consciously - or make changes in what we have hitherto "known" to be undeniably true.^{4*}

When exploring strongly held underlying values, alterations of the usual form of Council are often helpful. One simple variant

^{3*} David Bohm talks about such assumptions in connection with his concept of "absolute necessity." See "Insight, Knowledge, Science and Human Values," an extension and modification of an article by Bohm appearing in "Education and Values," edited by Douglas Sloan, Teacher's College Press, Columbia University, 1980.

^{4*} Bohm's intriguing process of unstructured, leaderless "dialog" (See, for example, "Quantum Leap: An Interview with David Bohm" by John Briggs, New Age Journal, September/October, 1989) may be a yet more powerful way to confront and ultimately reconcile profound differences in values, but this quite formless process requires virtually unlimited amounts of time and usually evokes a period of unsettling chaos. Most schools and communities are not ready to make such commitments or take such risks on a regular basis. Committing to the Council Process is usually challenge enough.

is to place the talking stick in the center of the circle (say after completing one round in the usual fashion), where it can be retrieved by anyone wanting to speak again and then returned to the center. In this way the attentive listening and spirit of Council are maintained while those particularly impassioned can deepen their interaction without the necessity of hearing from the entire circle.

Another form well suited to the extended exploration of a complex or demanding issue, particularly when the circle is large, is the “fishbowl,” or “web.” In this process, which also lends itself admirably to decision making, a few pillows or chairs (four is usually suitable) are placed in the center of the circle along with the talking stick. As the Council starts, anyone can fill the empty seats and make their statement. Then that person passes the stick to the next person in the center and returns to the large circle, leaving a space for others stirred to speak. People are allowed to return to the fishbowl a second or even a third time, but are asked to self-regulate if there remain others who as yet haven’t contributed.

Witnessing the “multilogue” unfold in the center of the circle - in the place of the Children’s Fire itself - brings the essential nature of the issues being explored into greater focus. The familiar way in which we identify particular individuals with particular positions (including our own!) dissipates and instead each person is heard giving voice to a facet of the whole. We come to see if we really care about the issue itself or are primarily serving personal needs in taking our position. We learn that the Council Process will eventually locate the “truth of the matter” (even if it was not ours at the outset). Eventually, we begin to enjoy the liberating experience of making a strong statement about a topic without attachment, knowing that our position will be reiterated as needed. This may take longer than circumstances seem to demand, but consensus is not always possible. Sometimes the truth of Council is to uncover the need for a greater understanding of what is still unclear or irresolvable about the issues.

The fishbowl can also be used effectively for conflict resolution. In this case the two individuals in discord, or most representing the antagonistic forces, sit in the center facing each other. Two witnesses are chosen to join them, either by the ones in conflict or by the larger circle. The discordant pair states their positions in turn, using the talking stick, and then each is allowed a second shorter statement for clarification and response. Next the two witnesses make their comments, not necessarily taking sides, but rather describing as objectively as they can what they have observed and understood about the issues. The witnesses can then leave, making room for others to come and share their observations or the entire larger circle can be asked to respond as a circle of witnesses.

This variant of the fishbowl is very effective for working with relationships in conflict that desire reflection from the group.

The two people sit in the center and share their differing perspectives on the issues separating them. The rest of the circle, then make their observations. Often the witnesses gain as much or even more from this process as does the pair itself.

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“It was uncanny witnessing you - like watching Marilyn and myself in intimate conversation,” Dick said after Ariel and David had rejoined the outer circle. “Of course, I saw so much more then when Marilyn and I are struggling with similar issues. I could have hugged you David when you told Ariel, ‘I wish you could just let me love you in my own way and not beat me up because I don’t love you the way you want me to love you.’ I wanted to both cry and laugh. We’ve been in that place so many times. But you guys seem so clear about it - and always in touch with your humor. I love the way you tease each other, even when the going gets rough. Marilyn and I need to be lighter and stop taking ourselves so seriously!”

Sometimes one part of the circle can witness another part: “I’ve never witnessed a men’s circle before,” Janet said, her eyes full of tears. “I realize that some of my attitudes about men are still stuck way back with my father and brothers. You all seemed so sensitive and compassionate with each other - and the way you talked about your relationships... I thought only women could do that. Watching you gives me a sense of freedom - and new hope for Michael and me. Thank you for letting me observe!”

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Formal witnessing is a basic part of Council that brings a different perspective to the circle. One approach is to designate a few regular members of the group as witnesses on a rotating basis or visitors can be asked to participate in this way. Witnesses sit in the circle, but are silent as the talking stick goes around, listening with as much of the “long view” as they can muster. Then, after everyone has spoken, the witnesses are asked to comment, not just in the same vein as the statements already made, but to talk about the Council process itself from an objective point of view not easily taken by those embroiled in the sharing. Often a witness will have something to reflect of value to the leaders about their way of handling the Council. Or, as in our adaptation of some Native American traditions, witnesses can be asked to reflect particular positions on the Medicine Wheel - for example, giving voice to the wisdom and logic of the North or the introspective qualities of the West.

During the Council trainings, we often start the morning session by asking for dreams. The stick can be passed around or, alternatively, those who want to share their dreams can speak spontaneously out of the opening silence or the stillness after drumming. In this way a montage is created that reflects the entire circle’s journey into the dream world. Unless an individual subsequently makes a particular request, reactions to dreams or analytical comments are not offered. In Council we listen to dreams as “stories of the night.” In a group that meets together over an extended period of time, it is not unusual for people to

give other members of the circle significant roles in their dreams. Sharing dreams then builds an even stronger web of intimacy within the group. Eventually, even without overtly implementing the practice of dream incubation, two or more individuals may begin to have a piece of the same dream.

Council Leadership

There are as many styles of Council leadership as there are Council leaders. Some leaders are active and directive; some stay very much in the background, letting the Council process unfold almost entirely from others in the circle. The more experienced leaders vary their style, as the situation demands, taking their cues from the Council's purpose and realities of the moment.

Sometimes a leader will initiate the round in order to set a tone appropriate to serving the group's intentions. At other times, the leader may choose to speak last, using his or her turn not only to share on a personal level, but also to respond to what others have said and to summarize the central themes that emerged during the session. When there are two leaders, both of these important functions can be accomplished in the same Council.

If time permits, the leader may send the stick around a second time or place it in the center to facilitate further exploration. However, as we indicated earlier, pushing for a resolution by the end of a session - even if it were possible - may not be an appropriate goal. In some situations the most useful action the leaders can take at the end of a round is to be silent and let the dynamics of the Council work on each individual until the circle is ready to meet again. Above all, the leaders should exemplify the practice of devout listening, a willingness to take risks in what they share and a non-attachment to personal position.

Council leadership grows out of the shamanic tradition, rather than the more familiar roles of teacher, priest or therapist. The latter usually create a distance between the leader and the group, a "distinction in authority" that sets the leader apart - particularly in regard to risk-taking. The Shaman, on the other hand, is fully on the journey with each member of the circle, facing all the dangers inherent in being personally vulnerable. Above all, the leader carries the vision of the organic interdependence of the entire group - the "wholeness" of the tribal circle. The Council leader's authority, like the Shaman's, arises out of personal authenticity, extensive experience and wisdom training. Whether with humor, the weaving of words or silence, strong leaders stay present and committed to what is actually taking place, rather than invested in the Council being

“successful” from their own preconceived point of view. A truly successful Council is an authentic one, no matter how dark or unresolved the outcome.

Leaders must always be ready to hear “surprising truth,” whoever speaks it and in whatever form. Strong leaders are not invested in being the truth-Sayers or the ones who “know” (although that may be the case, of course). Rather, they delight in empowering others in the circle and, most importantly, in empowering the circle itself. Good leadership is usually transparent, in the sense that Council members leave the circle less impressed with the wisdom and power of the leaders than with a strong feeling of the movement and interconnectedness of the whole circle.

In this sense the ideal Council leader is like the “Sacred King or Queen” that Robert Moore talks about so eloquently.^{5*} As Moore points out, it is essential to remember that no leader among us (nor parent, teacher or therapist for that matter) is immune from falling into the “Shadow King or Queen” at times. A leader identified with this archetypal figure holds tenaciously to the position of power and yearns for the approval of others, no matter how cleverly those tendencies are disguised. In Council it is up to everyone in the circle to vigorously reflect any manifestation of the Shadow in the leaders when they see it. When that happens, the leaders must be able to find a non-defensive position from which to evaluate the reflection and, if appropriate, make the necessary adjustments to bring the Council back into balance.

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“I’ve been sitting here, getting angrier and angrier,” Mark said snatching the talking stick from the center and staring intensely at John. “I don’t like the way you’ve been leading these Councils. We’re supposed to be exploring how each of us can take greater leadership in the community, but ironically I don’t feel you’re really opened to what some of us have been saying. You’re willing to talk about self-governance, but I don’t feel anything will really change. You still want the last word and think you know what’s best for all of us.”

“I don’t see it that way,” John responded after a moment of charged silence. “You don’t seem to be able to handle my authority or anyone else’s for that matter. But we’re not going to deal with leadership productively by battling this way. Why don’t we move into a fishbowl right now, just the two of us, and then let everyone bear witness.” John looked around the circle for agreement. He was greeted with a chorus of “Ho’s!”

“I’ve wanted to do this for a long time,” Mark said as he stepped into the center.

^{5*} King, Warrior, Magician, Lover, Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, Harper, 1990.



The Mystery of Council

Ultimately, it is difficult to write about what happens in Council.^{6*} As is true for other timeless ceremonial forms that are still actively evolving, Council works its magic in mysterious ways. For example, we remember the experience of being with “the ancestors” and the “yet unborn,” during the same Council. Current time dissolved and we had the distinct feeling of being nourished with the wisdom of an ancient circle of elders gathered to make an important tribal decision. Then, a little later we saw clearly that, by our further evolving the practice of listening and speaking from the heart, the future of Council was being seeded for those not yet born who would follow us. The feeling of interdependence of the circle was visceral and carried with it a sense of our inseparable connection with both past and future. The Council seemed to have an evolutionary life of its own; a life whose presence we felt palpably at the time, even though describing it now eludes our powers of articulation.

This sense of interdependence can extend beyond time and familiar environment to include other cultures and even other species. A diverse group can become a microcosm of larger ecosystems made up of animals, plants and landscapes. We come to see each person in the circle as representing another culture or species, intrinsically valuable for his or her unique presence. When this occurs, we glimpse our humanity, no matter how important, as part of a larger organism and so realize a profound sense of connectedness with other forms of life. A powerful example of this takes place in “The Council of All Beings” experience developed by Joanna Macy and John Seed.^{7*} The principle of interdependence is further supported by the quality of leadership that emerges in Council. The long prevalent dominator model of hierarchical authority tends to be replaced by a strong commitment to partnership, analogous to that practiced in certain traditional earth-cherishing cultures.^{8**}

The place a Council is conducted is very important. Whether you gather on a mountaintop, in a classroom, or by the ocean, the place will influence the work you are doing. Connecting with the locale and its history permits the seen and unseen forces of the place to deepen the Council. Choosing an environment in which the whole circle can sit comfortably and without interruption helps bring a sense of sacred space to the Council.

^{6*} This motivated the production of a video entitled “Speaking from the Heart,” filmed and edited by James Seligman and Harry Wiland in 1988. The video, which is available from The Ojai Foundation, documents a five-day “Council Retreat” with a group of seniors from the Crossroads School and provides a good introduction to the use of Council.

^{7*} Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings, John Seed, Joanna Macy, Arne Naess and Pat Fleming, New Society, 1988.

^{8**} See, for example, Riane Eisler’s, The Chalice and the Blade, Harper & Row, 1987.

From the psychological point of view, Council provides a rare opportunity to experience our personal self reflected in the relationship to a circle of others. Consequently, for each of us the circle becomes a living manifestation of the many aspects of the larger Self, in much the same way that Jung saw our personal family (particularly in dreams) as representing the arena of opportunity for achieving the completion and balance that comes with Self-awareness.

In contrast to our familiar authority model, the transference in Council is to the entire circle, rather than to a single individual (e.g. therapist, priest or teacher). Thus, intimacy, bonding, trust and the resulting healing take place with fewer patterns of dependency than are familiar in relationships with authority figures (or primary relationships for that matter). When a Council is working, others in the circle are seen as true cohorts, or “cohearts,” as an old friend and practitioner of Council used to say. We are given the awareness of being part of something larger than ourselves, something organic that is both nourishing and growth producing - the “large body” of the ancients or the Self that holds the center of Jung’s model of the psyche.

Council participants often have the experience of being in a “circle of mirrors,” in which each person’s story or sharing provides a reflection of some aspect of our own experience — familiar and yet different enough to yield fresh insight. Sometimes, the mirrors may reflect darkly, showing us a part of ourselves we would prefer not to see at that moment. But, in the practice of Council, truth is usually communicated in a heartfelt way. So we are less likely to flee and so block such reflections from shedding light on what needs to be seen. The empowerment of Council depends on the willingness and courage of the participants to face their individual (and collective!) Shadows, to head directly into the core of the problems at hand and explore their darkest corners. Patterns of avoiding the Shadow, so difficult to be aware of in ordinary interactions, are more easily recognized and overcome in Council, because of the sense of safety inherent in the practice of devout attention. In short, Council offers a real opportunity to keep each other honest.

As in the ancient circles of elders (and perhaps in the mystery schools as well), each Council member comes to know they bring a piece of the truth to the circle - essential in itself, but only a part of the whole. The passion of our personal vision is shared without attachment and then our position is released to the larger truth of the circle. When Council is working, we all experience this truth without any threat to personal identity and without the “tyranny of the collective.” Everyone recognizes what’s really happening and sees the path to “right action,” often more or less at the same time, and usually accompanied by the special joy inherent in the co-visioning process.

This experience of simultaneous common realization should not be confused with the democratic process treasured by our political idealism. In Council we rarely determine which position is held by the majority – by taking a vote, for example.

Sometimes a single individual in touch with the larger truth – and clear enough to reflect it in Council – can eventually bring the entire circle into focus. On more than a few occasions we have experienced a young child being the truth-holder in a Council of his elders.

Simply put, the essence of Council lies in direct participation with our cohorts in the realization of (the circle's) wholeness. The interdependence among members of the Council then becomes a deeply felt reality that frees us from the bondage of self-absorption and opens the door to spirited co-creation.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge and express our gratitude to the many people who have contributed significantly to our practice of Council in schools and communities: Elizabeth and Bob Cogburn originally brought Council into Jack Zimmerman's life through their pioneering ceremonial activities with The New Song Sun Dance Community. Virginia Coyle first worked with Council in many women's circles and wilderness groups. Joan Halifax first introduced Council to The Ojai Foundation in 1979 after many years of studying Native American traditions. At the experimental Heartlight School, where Council was a daily practice for students from 1980 through 1984, many contributions to its development were made through Jaquelyn McCandless' experienced skills in group dynamics and the irresistible enthusiasm of Ruthann Saphier. Jaquelyn continues to be a family and dyadic Councilmate of Jack Zimmerman's during these many years of partnership. Ruthann was also instrumental in launching the Mysteries Program at the Crossroads School in 1983 and in the period that followed. Shelley Kessler has expanded and directed the Mysteries Program at Crossroads since 1985; together with the school's able Human Development Staff, she has prepared a manual for teachers and schools interested in implementing their own Mysteries Program.^{9*}

We also want to acknowledge the many groups who, during the sixties and seventies, had the courage and insight to meet regularly "in circle," as well as the Threshold Network, which is the largest group we know of experimenting with practices similar to those described here.

^{9*} The Mysteries Sourcebook, Crossroads School Human Development Department: 1714 - 21st Street, Santa Monica, CA 90404.

Finally, to all of our teachers, in person and in nature, whose lessons surface in Council when least expected, to all those schools and organizations exploring techniques that help free us from old patterns of dominance by authority, and, in particular, to members of The Ojai Foundation Community, the hundreds of students and many other friends with whom we have sat in Council these past ten years, our warmest appreciation for your stories and your listening. The writing of this article, our work and our lives have been greatly nourished by the wisdom of the circle.

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U.S.A. \$5.00



The authors would like to express their appreciation to the Utne Reader for printing a version of this article in the March/April 1991 issue, and to Robert Levi for design and layout. Artwork by Virginia Coyle.

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Revised: March 1991, January 1993