CIRCLES OF LEARNING: CREATING OPPORTUNITY TO GIVE VOICE AND BEAR WITNESS TO SELF, OTHERS, AND NATURE IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

By

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Abstract

By asking, “Is Circle (also known as “council”) an effective methodology for environmental education?”, this thesis explores the significance of creating Circles of learning as a communication process with implications for environmental education and personal transformation. From a phenomenological perspective, I have positioned my research as an autobiographical narrative of what it is to be both researcher (observer) and research instrument (facilitator & participant) as well as creating the conditions for a case study of Circle participants. Further, I held interviews with Circle practitioners and instructors. The premise of Circle is to create an intentional listening space for each person to have a voice and be witnessed as they tell their stories. This paper provides some insight here, and explores how Circle can become an effective means of exploring ecological identity, self-awareness, relationship-building, a sense of community, emotional connections to nature and a sense of wonder within the process.

Key words: Circles of learning, Circle, council, communication, transformation, environmental education, phenomenological, emotional, ecological identity, self-awareness, listening, community, connection, nature, wonder
Acknowledgements

In love & light, joy & gratitude, I dedicate this ‘masters’ piece to:

My beautiful aunt Caren – who gave me my first book on Circle so many years ago when she saw the potential within me, which I at the time could not yet see. Thank-you my dear friend for taking delight in my learning journey every step of the way.

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Chapter One: Introducing the Work

This research is presented as a three strand braid of: an autobiographical narrative of what it is to be simultaneously researcher (observer) and research instrument (facilitator & participant); a case study of Circle participants and; semi-structured interviews with Circle practitioners and instructors. Rather than follow a traditional format outlining introduction, literature review, methodologies, results and conclusions, each of these elements will be introduced as they become appropriate throughout the process of telling the story of the Circle.

The premise of Circle is to create an intentional listening space for each person to have a voice and be witnessed as they tell their stories. While this paper provides some insight there, it also explores how Circle can become an effective means of exploring ecological identity, coming to self-awareness, building relationships, creating a sense of community, connecting to nature and to a sense of wonder within that process.

My experiences with facilitating Circles over the years drew me to this research with its potential as an effective methodology for teaching, learning and communicating environmental and ecological concepts. Through this research, I have come to understand Circle as a kind of sacred space that can be created when people speak meaningfully and listen respectfully to each other with possible implications for personal transformation and community-building. From this point on, I will also refer to Circle as “council”, as these terms can be interchangeable.
In the beginning of my research, I asked the question, “Is Circle an effective methodology for environmental education (EE)?” In order for people to authentically speak about what matters to them about the environment and their place in it, I was drawn to the safe social aspects of Circle as a way for this to happen. What surprised me in my research is that while this communication process allowed for emotionality and authenticity with respect to environmental matters, it also created a space for slowing down and being together in the present moment where relationships, a sense of equality, a sense of wonder and a sense of community with humans and the “more-than-human” (Abram, 1996), world were fostered.

David Orr (2004), an environmental educator at Oberlin College, writes that the Earth is inscribed in us and that we ought to educate in such a way as to stay true to the etymology of the word ‘education’ (rooted from educe or to draw out), and draw out our affinity for all living beings on the Earth, rather than aim to accumulate more facts and data (p.213). When I asked myself, “How might we educate in this way?”, I decided to reflect more deeply about my own experiences with Circle and to collect other people’s experiences in order to discover the significance of Circle with respect to EE. I wondered, “Could we draw out our affinity for the Earth by listening more deeply to each other and to ourselves?” And what about listening more deeply to the Earth? Would Circle be a valid and valuable process for us to listen to the Earth speak?

This thesis is a qualitative phenomenological exploration of many aspects of the lived experience (van Manen, 1990), of being in Circle. “The lifeworld, the world
of lived experience is both the source and object of phenomenological research” (p. 53). In order to gain a wider understanding of how people experience the Circle process, I collected data from a number of sources including: personal artwork\textsuperscript{1} and journaling; attending a Way of Council I training workshop (see Appendix A); designing and facilitating an Earth Speak Circle\textsuperscript{2} and; interviewing subject experts who lead and or teach this process.

Further, I imagined myself within a metaphorical Circle throughout this research in as much as I followed the council principles of speaking authentically, listening deeply, and witnessing what was going on around me as a way to bring myself fully to this work. “To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence from the center of our being” (van Manen, 1990, p.43).

I have stayed true to the way of Circle by each person’s views having a distinct voice within this paper represented by a different font. For example, the main body of this research is shown in Century Schoolbook 12 pt as demonstrated here. My personal voice appears as Comic Sans MS 12 pt, the case study participants are each represented in Bradley Hand ITC 12 pt, and I have further delineated their unique contributions with different colors for each person’s voice. Finally, the interviewee’s contributions appear as Papyrus 12 pt and again I have chosen different colors to discern each unique voice.

\textsuperscript{1} I used art work as another means of personal journaling and reflection to deepen the learning process.

\textsuperscript{2} This is the name I chose for the four Circle sessions I created as a case study for this research.
All together, this paper can be viewed as a “social science art form” (Richardson, 2000), where creativity is demonstrated by virtue of using font, color, style, photographs and personal illustrations, as well as, “point of view, tone, texture, sequencing, metaphor, and so on” (p. 936).

The format of my research takes on the shape of a story being told, a narrative consistent with the lenses of both phenomenology (Gadamer, 1976), and Circle, as in both cases they require the telling of stories and sharing of experiences in order for meaning to be made. Baldwin & Linnea (2010) suggest that as we listen to the stories of others we can learn and gain the capacity to change our own behaviours. This holds great implication for EE where a common question arises, “How can we change the way we are behaving so that we can change the way we are living?” Also, when we share our stories, the ones we carry within us, we may become aware of how they influence how we live and the relationships we foster with humans and the more-than-human world; and in so doing, we have the opportunity to more fully understand our place in this world.

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3 Each photograph found within this paper is an original photograph taken by myself, the researcher. These photographs include: snapshots of the artwork I created for research purposes to enhance a deeper personal reflection of my thesis topic; snapshots of relevant personal artwork and; snapshots of the Earth Speak Circle environment and talking pieces.
Chapter Two: Including the Researcher’s Voice

I consider my own voice within this paper as a postmodernist approach and an equal contribution to the data and findings presented herein. There is a growing acceptance that one’s voice in a written study is an important methodological tool (Holliday, 2007; Moustakas, 1990; Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). The postmodernist approach sees a researcher’s strong personal presence as useful to increase transparency and accountability in the research as well as to emphasize the everyday nature of qualitative inquiry (Holliday, 2007).

Richardson (2000) advocates for nurturing one’s voice in qualitative research writing. She writes that the suppression of the writer’s voice in social science writing substituted for the voice of science is rather boring, to put it bluntly. She says the researcher’s knowledge develops through experimentation. She refers to this new kind of qualitative writing outside conventional social science as “creative analytic practices” or “CAP ethnography” (p.929); which she feels is enriching, diverse, socially engaging, non-hegemonic, and evocative of emotional responses. Yet, new ways of writing require new ways to critique this work, as Richardson points out, so she gives criteria to review such publications which include: “substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact and expression of reality” (p.937); all of which I found helpful to assess my own writing as research.

The process of incorporating my voice within this paper was a process of self-discovery. Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), also sees writing as a self-discovery process. van Manen (1990) contends that this type of
writing is ideal for seeing one’s biases, limits and sensibilities. This is also essential for maintaining rigor and reliability in the research (Holliday, 2007; Kirk & Miller, 1986). Moustakas (1990) suggests that one needs only to rely on one’s own resources within to discover the meaning of experiences. He writes, “The deepest currents of meaning and knowledge take place within the individual through one’s senses, perception, belief and knowledge” (p.15).

My hope for all education is that it values the process of self-discovery and empowers people to express their authentic voices and to be heard. I find that when people are denied this opportunity in any area of life, they feel they do not matter, and subsequently what they do does not matter either. This lack of valuing has everything to do with the future of the planet. If people feel that they matter, it is my experience that they are more likely to live in a way where the environment matters too.

Because I am in and of this world, and in and of this research, I cannot separate my subjective worldview from the data I present here. I do not believe this presents a problem because researchers rarely can separate themselves from the

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4 This art piece entitled, “Self Matters = Earth Matters” was created December 13, 2010 to meditate on how the way we feel about ourselves is deeply connected to how we relate to what’s around us, including the environment.
research process (Gadamer, 1976; Holliday, 2007; van Manen, 1990). Nonetheless, I will be mindful of my biases and limitations as an environmental educator as they pertain to this research. What’s more, to clearly hear all the voices that had something to say (individually and collectively) while collecting the data, it required that I remain objective.

The Circle isn’t about me it’s about giving a voice to ancient Earth wisdom. When I make Circle about me coming from a place of ego, I am lost in the labyrinth of self. When I think above myself and remove myself from the center of things, I begin to see more clearly the significance of Circle for the environmental field. In the very moment I make this insight known to my life partner a snow owl swoops down and lands on our laundry line post in front of us. We stop and stare in silence. For me, the owl has long symbolized the Earth’s wisdom. It is as if the owl bears witness to my insight and has come in an act of agreement: indeed, the Circle isn’t about me, it’s about making space to give voice to all others. And even more profound is where the Owl sits, on the laundry pole where I hang my garments that have been cleaned, and are now freely airing. This foreshadowed the days ahead of me “laundering” all the pieces of myself and emotionally going through the “wringer” in order to come “clean” on what was truly significant in researching the story of Circle.

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5 This art piece entitled, “Owl Time” was created November 22, 2010 to meditate on Circle as a medium to explore the Earth’s ancient wisdom.
My interest in Circle began in the summer of 2004. At the time I was going through a difficult and significant life change and began to read books on Celtic spirituality and Circle for interest. Utilizing the knowledge I was learning, I created a Circle to connect with other women who were also in need of personal empowerment and friendship. While many factors contributed to the overall magic of my original experience, the most significant aspect was speaking from the heart without interruption and being heard by all those present. It was as if the acknowledgment of my thoughts and feelings enlarged the meaning of my experience and my own significance at a time when I needed just that. It was also beneficial to listen to the stories of other women to know that I was not alone in this sometimes difficult journey we call life. The general consensus was that the experience was somewhat transformative and offered something akin to creating a sense of well-being for each participant. The woman’s Circle continued to take place for several years and taught me that there is a longing for many of us to have our thoughts and feelings acknowledged by others through authentic and attentive listening.

The years passed and I became involved in the environmental field through school and work. I awakened to countless environmental injustices and I required some kind of meaning-making process to make sense of it all. Further, in my field of work, with an environmental non-governmental organization (for six years) administering a community-wide litter control program, I often witnessed a sense of hopelessness expressed by individuals and groups responding to the state of the
environment. Something that may seem minor to some people such as litter in a ditch, for example, would be an emotional sore point for others. I started to wonder about what empowered the organization’s volunteers to continue cleaning up the litter year after year when clearly the problem wasn’t being solved. Around that time, I too succumbed to a state of hopelessness when thinking about the environment. That is when this question formed in my mind, “How do we remain hopeful and competent to deal with on-going loss and degradation of the natural world?” I wished to find a way to empower hopefulness within myself and others, and to possess the will and the way to carry on. I was seeking a way to evoke environmental action which meant each of us bringing an investment of personal time, energy, hands and heart to environmental issues. I remembered that at times of significant adversity I have always sought out someone to talk to, be it a friend, a professional or a tree! Yet sharing my grief for the natural world seemed a bit ‘unnatural’ to unload on someone. I began to wonder, “Is there a valid space to talk open-heartedly about emotional responses to the natural world, and to be heard?”

I found others who shared my concerns about what to do with their vulnerable emotions in response to the degradation of the natural world. Clearly, there was a need to talk about environmental crisis and uncertainty within a hopeful space to discover what it is we want and what it is we can do about what matters most to us about the planet as we share our stories (Wheatley, 2009). I then wondered, “What is the relationship between hope and taking environmental action?” Daniel Goleman (1995) in *Emotional Intelligence*, answers this question
best by suggesting that hope can mean that one will not give into anxiety, defeatist attitudes, or depression in the face of difficult challenges and set backs; and therefore, hope is necessary as a way of providing the will and the way for effective action unvarying in the face of adversity. As I meditated on all of this, especially hope for the Earth, I remembered my experiences with Circle and wondered, “Can we utilize Circle to address the challenges we face as well as draw out the affinities we hold with regard to the environment?” “It is always like this. Real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about” (Wheatley, 2009, p.26).

My inquiry into the significance of Circle as an environmental meaning-making tool had begun. It was further propelled by other work related experiences. I witnessed several events where diverse peoples came together to discuss environmental issues, including municipal and community meetings, that didn’t sit well with me. I was dumbfounded from my observations: people promoting their own agendas and expecting others to solve their dilemmas while taking little personal responsibility; people wanting clarity on an issue only to leave the meeting more confused and; people wanting the time and space to be heard only to be interrupted. I was also concerned with how some of these gatherings were highly emotionally charged with people displaying anger and outrage over environmental concerns. I walked away asking, “How do we begin to address environmental problems if we (all stakeholders involved) can’t interact and listen to each other in a cooperative and respectful way in the first place?” I wondered, “Can Circle create a
space for global environmental transformation where everyone’s voice is honoured and heard?” I realized then, that I needed to go back and research the very beginning of and history of Circle in order to understand the phenomenon surrounding the process, its symbolism, and cultural applications.

How do we get a group of people with vast differences in the way they think, feel and act, to listen to each other in order that they may work together? This seems at times no less difficult a task than gathering all sorts of creatures into a 'container' and expecting them to get along without 'devouring' each other. How do we achieve coalition keeping true to our exceptional differences?

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This photograph shows a doodle from my July 2009 MAEEC learning journal which depicts my thinking of what it may be like to create a space where everyone’s voice can be heard and where cooperation might be found. The writing in this picture reads: “It would be no different finding coalition if we were all animals of sorts – how to make a group of people with such differences in the way they think, feel, act…to work together…listen to each other…and not eat one another.”
Chapter Three: The History of Circle

The historical background of Circle, its symbolism (or the symbol used to delineate a circular shape denoted with a lowercased ‘c’), and humankind’s attraction to it throughout history, as well as how it emerges as a social practice, is explored here.

Indications of circle-based cultures can be found across the globe in ancient writings, sacred paintings and ruins (Baldwin, 1998; Baldwin & Linnea, 2010; Fincher, 1991). We cannot be entirely sure what motivated past cultures to incorporate circles in their lives, since ancient history is not a living history; however, there are several explanations that may give understanding to this repetitive phenomenon.

The first has to do with our very human existence. While this may not have been known to ancient dwellers, modern technology can now show how a human being begins as a tiny round circle or egg held in a spherical womb and when born, “we are pushed by a series of circular muscles down through the tubular birth canal and out through a circular opening into the world” (Fincher, 1991, p.2). Circular formations are inherent in our outer and inner bodies including our cells, eyes, navel and fingerprints to name a few. Even human body behaviours and rhythmic patterns are circular including patterns of growth, the menstrual cycle, and metabolic activity (Suzuki & Knudtson, 1992). These circular rhythmic patterns reflect the larger natural world human beings inhabit, because in the natural world, circles can be found everywhere. It is as if the very essence of life itself is a circle!
I am sent outside to locate a being in nature that speaks to me. I am participating in a “Council of all Beings” Circle design created by Joanna Macy, at a Way of Council I workshop in Shawnigan Lake, B.C. What does it mean to be ‘of nature’ I wonder? Circle shows itself to me in the first rain drop that hits the small pond where I am sitting. Is circle a part of nature too? Circle whispers to me, “Here I am, I am rippling”. I then look to my left and see a dandelion in full bloom. Circle laughs, “Here I am. I am opening, expanding, blooming”. I look to my right and see a plant formation with all its leaves extending ‘circularly’ outward from one central point. Circle exclaims, “Do you see me now? I am growing, I am life!” My head is spinning in circles as I contemplate the circle as the pattern of life and of nature itself. I am called back inside to share what I have witnessed nature speak to me.

We live on a circular planet that orbits\(^7\) around the Sun, a planet ruled by circular patterns including: weather currents, ocean tides, Moon cycles, and seasons. The night sky appears to us as moving in a circular pattern to which human kind over history has responded to by identifying constellations as deities, creating celestial wheels to predict humankind’s destiny and building human settlements to line up with the stars (Fincher, 1991). The Sun and the Moon are universal circles across space and time that not only appear to us as circular objects, but their circular rhythms infuse all of life. The Moon cycle is circular: from a sliver to full circle to waning back to a sliver again in a continuous pattern. Our consciousness is linked to the planet’s rotation around the Sun, where we sleep by night and awake by day. This very insight might explain why we view circle as a symbol for consciousness, as well as for life and death (Fincher, 1991).

I wonder if nature’s circular formations and rhythms explain why human cultures have been drawn to circles and Circle across time and space?

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\(^7\) Technically, the planet Earth orbits around the sun in an ‘elliptical’ pattern (nearly circular).
In addition to the wonders of nature, a circle has been used to explain the great mysteries of life and the unknown, how all things began and how to find one’s bearings in the world (Fincher, 1991). Take for example the medicine wheel, the zodiac wheel and Stonehenge. Fincher maintains that the circle is found world-wide in myths and creation stories including Maori legends, Egyptian mythology, the Upanishads of India, and indigenous peoples legends, to name a few. Baldwin (1998) writes that the circle appears to be the most common element linking indigenous cultures world-wide both ancient and those remaining today, including the Inuit, Aborigines of Australia, African peoples, and native tribes of the American plains; in particular where Circle ceremony and ritual is used to evoke the sacred. What is it about the circle that resonates so deeply within us that it has become an intrinsic part of human culture world-wide? Is it because it is it is inscribed in us?

According to C. J. Jung (in Baldwin, 1998), the visionary Swiss psychiatrist, we share a number of images in common with each other deep within our psyches.

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8 This art piece entitled, “Life itself is a Circle” was created on October 13, 2010 to meditate on the phenomenon of fashioning human cultures and organization structures from what we see inherent in nature.
including the circle which represents the collective consciousness where the history of all things and all human knowledge merges into one. If we consider consciousness to describe that which we know, the way in which we come to know can also be understood as “circle-like”. T.S. Eliot (1943) illuminates this phenomenon in his words, “We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time” (p.222). I understand this passage to mean that learning is not only an endless phenomenon, but that the learning process is also circular.

This circular learning process may be better understood by Gestalt theory (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951), which explains that in order to grow and mature as human beings we must come full circle repeatedly. To understand how it is possible to come full circle, viewing the self as a self-organizing system in which we are both the ‘part’ and the unified ‘whole’ is required. From what I have come to understand, Perls, Hefferline & Goodman in *Gestalt Therapy* put forward that the human mind is constantly shifting back and forth from dualistic thinking (part-thinking) to a unitary awareness (whole-thinking); which is the very condition of ‘coming to full circle’ that is needed for mental maturity and growth.

*My thesis undertaking was series of gestalt experiences. I constantly arrived ‘full circle’ in my thinking as my knowledge and experience of Circle matured and grew. So much the case that when I arrived at the end of my research it seemed that I was right back to my original thinking of the matter only with a deeper understanding of it all now; and at the same time, with more questions surfacing than when I first set out to study it.*
What is the connection between the symbol of circle and Circle as a process (or social practice)? Both seem to resonate so deeply within us! Circle first emerges as a social practice in primal human communities as a ritual of gathering around a campfire to turn to warmth, light and each other (Baldwin, 1998; Fincher, 1991; Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996). This is when we also developed language as a social tool to communicate knowledge and experience, and to process thought and feeling (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). Some say that Circle is our original form of community (Baldwin, 1998; Wheatley, 2009). It is possible to imagine our great ancestors sitting around a campfire interacting with one another through meaningful storytelling. Maybe this is why those who communicate their experiences of Circle feel as if they are ‘coming home’ with a sense of having been there before (Baldwin, 1998; Carnes & Craig, 1998; Macy & Brown, 1998; Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996), because it would seem that this is the way we humans have been together since ‘being together’ began.

So I wondered, “Why we have forgotten this way of being together if it is so much a part of who we are and where we have come from?” Our recent forgetfulness of its importance may be illuminated by the rise of scientific rationalism in the fifteenth century, and the transformation of feudal society and the period of colonial expansion that followed.

Once upon a time the Earth’s voice could be heard by a people who lived in close relationship with the natural world. Listening to the Earth these people understood the interconnectedness of all life, and so took care of the natural world. In doing so they experienced a deep connection with the Earth and gained valuable wisdom for how to live. These people passed
Descartes and Bacon, (Getty, 1997; Kinsley, 1995), are fifteenth century scientific rationalists who exemplify the consciousness of this worldview. Descartes held the universe as a huge machine, inanimate and lacking soul; moreover, to him nature was merely an object to be studied, manipulated and modified for scientific purposes. For Bacon, nature was something to be controlled and experimented on; and the aim of science was to provide human beings with knowledge necessary to dominate nature. Around this time an ethic of private property was also taking off as feudal society’s communal lands transformed to privatized enclosed lands for profit, which meant the loss of agricultural peasant communities and the beginning of a wage dependent class (Starhawk, 1982). Starhawk suggests that Witch hunts (in the sixteenth and seventeenth century), played a key role in the fragmentation of these communities by providing a way to legitimize the rising capitalist economy and its exploitation and demonization of women and nature. The colonial period followed and the peoples of the New World were also deemed devilish or savage and so exploited, their cultures secularized, and the ethic of private property enforced on their way of life (Hayne, 2000). The climate of these times included: thousands upon thousands of lives lost, communal lands expropriated, a loss of traditional knowledge, ceremony and traditions (like Circle), followed by a disconnection from the land (Brody, 1988; Haynes, 2000; Starhawk, 1982).

Another population of people existed on the Earth who could not hear the Earth’s voice. These people believed themselves the greatest of all living
beings, superior for their knowledge of things. They took pride in ownership, accumulating wealth, and making and having more and more things. Their population grew and soon all the land and things they could have were 'haved'. So they set out to find more resources and land taking with them on their quest their principle of absolute right to private ownership and a campaign of defamation for anyone who stood in their way. It was not long until they stumbled upon the people who listened to the Earth. And soon a great shift would occur where listening to the Earth and sharing her wisdom in sacred Circles would be forgotten by many.

Humankind’s appetite for ‘civilization’ is evident in ever-expanding economic development and continued exploitation of nature, bringing us to the problem of ecological destruction we face today. Kinsley (1995) writes that technology has enhanced humankind’s domination over nature and insulated us from it, following suit to the worldview that living too close to nature means being ‘devil-like’, without morality and having a disdain for progress and civilization among other beliefs. While new technologies enable us to communicate to people all over the globe and be more ‘connected’ to others, there seems to be more of a disconnect happening as

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9 This art piece entitled, “Remembering the Ancient Past” was created on October, 11, 2010 to meditate on the history of power-over structures over the course of history and to explore the possibility of Circle as means to dismantle these structures.
we spend more time indoors communicating through devices, physically and emotionally separated from each other and from nature.

Today, in western society, we are witnessing self-destructive behaviours such as addictions, violent crimes, racism, among others, that demonstrate our severance from our true natures and nature. In *A Sense of the Sacred: Finding our Spiritual Lives through Ceremony*, Adele Getty (1997) writes that at the root of this behaviour is the absence of the sacred. Getty articulates that we as human beings share a common need to achieve oneness with God, nature and the universe; and in the past, this sense of oneness was cultivated through ceremony, prayer and celebration, and supported by the tribe or the community. I wonder, “Can bringing the sacred back into our lives through the ceremony of Circle practice help us restore our connections and restore ourselves?”

**Weaving Cultures of Circle Together**

One culture that engenders Circles for remembering the sacred, (i.e. transcending rational consciousness and creating relationships with all beings), is known as the “Goddess” community, borne of agrarian communities that lived close to the land, the seasons, and the planets, making meaning through perennial ritual and ceremony in an everyday way (McCoy, 1998; Starhawk, 1982; Starhawk, Baker & Hill, 1998). Edain McCoy’s (1998) *Celtic Women’s Spirituality*, Alexiei Kondratiev’s (2003) *The Apple Branch: A Path to Celtic Ritual* and Robin Deen Carnes and Sally Craig’s (1998) *Sacred Circles: A Guide to Creating Your Own*
Women’s Spirituality provided a starting framework for me to understand the importance of incorporating ritual in my original experiences of the Circle process.

Another culture that plays a leading role in the advancement of Circle (more often referred to here as council), is the Native American culture as described by Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle (1996) in Way of Council, Christina Baldwin (1998) in Calling the Circle, and Jean Graveline (1998) in Circle Works: Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness, to name a few. Native American (or First Nations peoples as they are more commonly known in Canada), hold councils for many reasons such as: decision-making, problem-solving, healing, strengthening community and storytelling. The Talking Circle, for example, is where important community issues are discussed using a talking piece to enable one person to speak at a time while the rest of the community listens with respect and intent (Pranis, 2005). I have observed that most people generally understand Circle or council from this context.

Both the Goddess culture and First Nations culture frame my understanding of Circle. They both recognize the practice as sacred, set apart from regular time and space, where we can enter into a deepened state of consciousness marked by rituals that clearly define the space from the mundane (Graveline, 1998; Starhawk, 1982; Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996). Both cultures see Circle as an intentional process with a spiritual focus, often used for ceremonial occasions (e.g. celebrations and rites of passage), and as the preferred social structure to share stories, songs and community traditions (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996; Graveline, 1998; Starhawk,
1982). Fundamentally, they share beliefs that the Earth is a living being, that all life is interconnected, that each living being is sacred, and that it is our responsibility to care for each other (Graveline, 1998; Starhawk, 1982). Both give reverence to the natural world by acknowledging the four directions (North, South, East and West), as well as the four Earth elements: earth, wind, air and fire.

This art piece entitled, “Universal Circles”, was created on January, 03, 2011, to reflect on how nature elements seem to exist universally in ‘ceremonial’ type Circles across cultures world-wide.
Chapter Four: What Constitutes Circle?

I have learned that Circle is used for numerous contemporary purposes including: consulting, conflict resolution and peace-making, creating community, therapy or group support, decision-making, honouring rites of passage and celebrations, and self-transformation, etc. Circle practitioners each bring something different to the process, adding their uniqueness of ideas, background, experience, culture, rituals and customs, to create models that suit their purposes. There are also different forms and formats of Circle that I learned at the Way of Council I workshop that I attended, such as the Fishbowl\(^{11}\) or the Web\(^{12}\).

After examining the available literature on Circle, I found that there is little, if any, variance in how authors explain its roots, social implications, practices and values. In fact, each touch upon common values and concepts inherent in the process.

A Circle is a social structure in which we gather together for a shared purpose or intention to engage in meaningful listening and respectful speaking. This communication process is governed by commonly shared values, principles and practices which are essential to help create a safe and comfortable space (unlike other social spaces), in which we can engage in a deeper way with each other. When engaged, we sit in a circular formation to enhance our capacity to listen to each

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\(^{11}\) In a Fishbowl Circle there is an inner and outer Circle. The talking piece is used by those present in the inner Circle while those in the outer listen. The latter can be invited to share what they have witnessed when the inner Circle is finished sharing. A richer description of the Fishbowl Circle can be found in: Zimmerman, J. & Coyle, V. (1996). The Way of Council. Canada: Bramble Books.

\(^{12}\) In a Web Circle the talking piece is placed in the center and the speaker picks up the piece when moved to do so, returning it to the center after talking, and so on. A richer description of the Web Circle can be found in: Zimmerman, J. & Coyle, V. (1996). The Way of Council. Canada: Bramble Books.
other by seeing eye to eye with who is doing the talking at any given time. Sitting in a circle formation, however, does not necessarily mean that we are practicing Circle.

The process is egalitarian which means no one is ranked above another and everyone contributes equally; however, often there is a facilitator of the process and principles. In many Circles, leadership is rotated and shared. To share leadership also means that each person present is invested and responsible for the direction the group takes (Carnes & Craig, 1998). Most people can understand Circle as an egalitarian process given two famous examples: Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table (Bulfinch, 1998), and the Socratic Circle (Copeland, 2005).

Circle may also be understood by what it is not: it is not hierarchal like a boss above employees or a teacher in front of the class dictating to students. Opposite to the hierarchal world which promotes power-over, motivates competition and climbing the ladder, Circle practice is a way of organizing based on the power-within us which is realized when we act in the spirit of community (Starhawk, 1982).

Circle is a self-reflective process in which we share our experiences and stories as we deeply reflect on well-designed questions. The types of questions posed play a significant role in the overall success of a Circle13. “A powerful question also has the capacity to ‘travel well’ – to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or community.

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13 At the *Way of Council* training workshop I attended in November 2010, the importance of conjuring up deep reflective questions for effective Circle work was taught. Group participants were led in a group activity to craft examples of deep questions around nature experiences.
Questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change” (Vogt, Brown, & Isaacs as cited in Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p.85).

In effect, the Circle process enables us to be our authentic selves and share deeply because all participants are considered a valuable member of the Circle community, no matter who they are, where they come from or what they do. “We can stand in the fierceness of our emotions when we share because in Circle we hold each other as able” (H. Leighton, personal communication, June 11, 2011).

Part of the Circle is to trust that everybody can take care of themselves and are whole. And so for me that means, anyone of us can fall apart from time to time in that Circle and know that we are going to be held, and seen in our fullness and in our wholeness, and so hopefully over time I can trust that I can be more and more authentic with the people who I am in council with (L. Austein, personal communication, February 1, 2011).

The center of a Circle is considered sacred. Christina Baldwin (1998) defines the sacred center as the authority that resides in the space and holds together all that takes place within it. This authority, she writes, is a spiritual source not an egotistical force – the definition of which is our own to decide on. Objects of spiritual significance may be placed in the center to emphasis the sacred, items familiar to the group or what each person contributes. It is important that the use of items does not give reason to forget the principle they represent: that the world and our lives are sacred (Baldwin, 1998; Carnes & Craig, 1998). Spiritual practices are used in Circle simply as a means of opening ourselves up to the sacred and to spirit. Zimmerman & Coyle (1996) define spiritual practices as any activity that both awakens the desire for and provides the means to expand the consciousness of the
self, other and the larger mystery. Craig & Carnes (1998) contend that Circle is a spiritual practice whereby we become consciously connected to ourselves and clearer about our role on the planet.

When we gather in Circle, we do so with a purpose or an intention in mind. The intention is typically clear before the group gathers, as it is the reason why people come together. After the intention has been set and agreed upon by a group, everyone makes a commitment to see it through. Carnes & Craig (1998) describe this commitment much like a marriage contract that directs us to prioritize the relationships we have with each other and to care for the well-being of the community in good times and bad times.

Confidentiality is an important practice of Circle. This means simply that what is said in Circle stays in Circle. Confidentiality is indispensable to create an environment of trust between people and a safe social space in which to engage in a deeper conversation about what matters most to us. Breaches in confidentiality (such as gossiping about someone outside of Circle) not only hurts the persons involved, but can destroy Circle relationships and undermine group trust and cohesion overall (Bolen, 1999; Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996).

The environment in which Circles takes place plays an important role in how comfortable and open people feel to participate. Generally, a comfortable, quiet place where a group in session will not be interrupted, and is free from distractions and outside noises, is ideal. Also, essential to the environment is a space that encourages people to be fully present as well as fully engaged with others.
A clear transition between regular social space and the more sacred space of Circle also plays an important role in creating a safe container where people can engage more fully. This is marked by an opening and a closing ritual. There are different ways this can be done and not every ritual may suit those participating. Simply lighting a candle can help center focus and signal that it is time to speak one at a time. A dedication may be given, for example: people can take turns saying a few thoughtful words as they pour water into a bowl (or light a candle) that is placed in the center of the Circle. Openings can also be done with words (e.g. reading a poem), sounds (e.g. bells, humming, singing, drumming), visualizations (e.g. staring into the candle flame), or silence. We can also use similar rituals when closing the space. It is important that people remain present in the space until the Circle is ‘closed’. This helps to keep the attention of those participating focused, and to keep present the energy and creativity that is generated when people gather for a shared purpose (Baldwin, 1998; Carnes & Craig, 1998; Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996). It is equally important to close the Circle so that people know that it’s time to shift out of the heightened space of Circle into another more social way of being together.

**The Talking Piece**

A talking piece is used to aid effective speaking and listening. The person who holds the piece is the one talking while everyone else present listens. In usual conversation, for example: we interrupt each other, finish sentences, hurry through

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14 Hilary Leighton and Lori Austein, teachers and council facilitators of the *Way of Council* I training workshop I attended in November 2010, introduced this method of opening a Circle. Each person was invited to share a dedication as they lit a candle (in one instance), or poured water from a pitcher into a bowl (in another instance); which were located in the center of the Circle. The first round of council followed.
what we want to say before being interrupted, plan what we want to say next, ask questions, make comments, steer the dialogue towards our own agenda and other habits that inhibit our ability listen deeply to each other. The talking piece is a visual (and physical), reminder to refrain from these habits and to be mindful in the way we listen. Baldwin (1998) writes “the talking piece helps us to slow down so we listen without planning our own speech, so we hear from everyone, not just those who like to leap in and lead the discussion” (p. 32).

Talking pieces can be any object or objects that hold meaning to the group such as rocks, sticks, crystals, feathers, or shells. For example, Doyle (a university professor, and interviewee), used a whiteboard marker once to facilitate a Circle discussion with his students. There may be one talking piece that is passed around from person to person, or there may be several pieces placed in the center available to choose from when individuals are ready to speak. The latter is suitable when

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15 The center of the case study Circle which held several talking pieces (rocks & sticks), that were used to engage in meaningful speaking and respectful listening.
using the *Web Circle*, or the popcorn method\textsuperscript{16} of speaking: the first person to speak is the one who (first) picks up a talking piece when they reach a point of ‘popping’ with something to say and now feel ready to share with the group. After this person is finished speaking, they then pass the talking piece to the person sitting next to them typically in the clock-wise (or sun-wise) direction.

There are two appropriate instances when others may vocalize something while someone else is holding the talking piece and speaking. One is voicing words of agreement as a way of saying ‘I hear you’, ‘I agree with you’, or ‘that resonates with me’, etc. For example, the cultural references of “way” and “aho”\textsuperscript{17} were used at the *Way of Council I* workshop for this reason. It is important, however, when choosing cultural expressions to be sensitive to the people that you honour when you use this language when practicing council (L. Austein, personal communication, November 21, 2011). The other appropriate instance to speak when another is speaking is for the Circle facilitator to perform a ‘process intervention’ reserved for the rare occasions when someone is speaking in a non-present manner (i.e. violent or angry attacking manner), or has lost the thread of the council (L. Austein, personal communication, November 21, 2011).

**Inclusive Communication Principles**

In *Way of Council*, Zimmerman & Coyle (1996) describe four basic principles that facilitate speaking and listening: being of lean expression, speaking from the heart, spontaneity, and listening from the heart. Hilary Leighton, council

\textsuperscript{16} The concept of ‘popcorn’ speaking was introduced at the *Way of Council I* training workshop.

\textsuperscript{17} Deriving from a Lakota prayer, ‘Aho Metakuye Oyasin’ translates as “everything is connected” or “oneness” and was offered in honor of that culture to our class at the *Way of Council I* training workshop.
facilitator, explains in her own words these four principles as: “getting to the heart of the matter, speaking from the heart, being open-hearted, and listening from the heart” (H. Leighton, personal communication, November 21, 2010). I have adopted the latter to explain Circle’s inclusive communication principles.

‘Getting to the heart of the matter’ simply means to be of lean expression and to refrain from mindless babble. Each person is responsible for monitoring their verbal contributions to make sure they are not a ‘time hog’ and that everyone has a turn to speak. Monitoring one’s contributions involves being mindful of what you share, (i.e. having a sensitivity for the ‘field’ that is created within a group), that what you contribute or don’t contribute can impact the direction of group sharing and can effect the well-being of the group overall.

To ‘speak from the heart’ means to speak with intention and to speak one’s truth. Circle offers the quiet and focused space for people to really listen to themselves in order to speak their truth. When we speak from the heart, we are speaking from the ‘I’ experience, rather than generalizing about others or events. Carnes & Craig (1998) propose that speaking from the ‘I’ experience is the only perspective we can speak in all honesty and have authentic claim over. They explain that it is the intensely personal focus on our life stories that make Circles different from other groups. Pranis (2005) contends that this type of storytelling involves a process of self reflection where we are able to better see our perception of reality. She writes:
In a Circle, life experience is more valuable than advice. Participants share their experiences of joy and pain, struggle and triumph, vulnerability and strength to understand the issue at hand. Because storytelling engages people on many levels – emotional, spiritual, physical and mental – listeners absorb stories differently than they do advice. (pp. 13-14)

There is no obligation to speak, we can simply choose to listen and let the talking piece pass by us. Sometimes we might not have something to say, not feel comfortable, ready, or able to share. Whatever the reason, we can choose to remain silent, and that silence is respected and welcomed as expression in and of itself. There is always the opportunity for those that may have passed in the initial round of council to speak later on before the closing, if they so choose to.

Circle is a part of that ancient Earth wisdom that reminds us that we are all connected, and each one of us has a unique role and place in the great living story. To be in Circle is to slow down, in order that we may listen to that story.

To ‘be open-hearted’ means to be spontaneous to what’s ‘on your heart’ when the talking piece has been passed to you. It is a self-referential process of looking inside oneself for direction in what is shared (Carnes & Craig, 1998); which means no rehearsing or planning what to say, and trusting in self to know what needs to be said and what is said is enough.

A spectrum of colors tells a story as I create today’s art piece. I open my heart and give attention to the emotions that move through me, without having judgement, with out trying to control what my art piece should look like. As I allow the colors and shapes to spontaneously take form on the canvass, I begin to understand more about practicing open-heartedness to what surfaces inside of me when sharing in Circle.
To ‘listen from the heart’ means to listen attentively and respectfully to the person speaking, while suspending any reactions, judgments, and self-agendas. Zimmerman & Coyle (1996) suggest that we may improve the quality of our listening by imagining that the speaker’s words are entering our mid-chest area rather than our ears. They also put forward the idea of listening from the heart as if one is a five year old child listening to a favourite bedtime story.

Listening from the heart is really about putting yourself in the other person’s shoes. It is about listening without judgment and noticing any emotional reactivity in one’s self with curiosity without directing that reactivity toward the speaker. Sometimes I ask people to visualize an ear right over their heart and try to listen from that place. As we practice speaking from the heart, we speak from the personal “I” of our experience so as we listen to another from the heart, we are able to connect with the underlying story that formed a person’s opinion. (L. Austein, personal communication, February 1, 2011).

Listening from the heart also implies opening one’s heart to what we hear and to the person that is sharing. It is the practice of listening to others without

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18 This art piece entitled, “Spontaneous Speaking” was created November 8, 2010 to explore opening up to what spontaneously arises within when attempting to communicate emotions and heart.
judging their points of view, their experiences, and what or how they communicate.

We may not like what someone has to say, we may not even agree – yet, we are challenged to understand where others are coming from all the same.
Chapter Five: Opportunity for Circle in Environmental Education

How we understand Circle as an effective methodology for EE is dependent on what we understand EE to mean. Chawla (2001) defines EE as any process in which an individual gains awareness of the environment; the knowledge, values, experiences that enable him/her to act individually or collectively and to solve present and future environmental problems – this includes both formal and informal educational activities. Jensen & Schnack (1997) articulate that the objective of EE is to create action competent individuals equipped with the courage, commitment and desire to get involved in environmental action. Orr (1992) suggests that the aim of EE is to bring about a change of conditions necessary to heal the breach between humanity and its habitat, the kind of education that prepares people to live sustainably on Earth.

We are now hearing more often that we need a radical change in the way we have been living in relationship to the planet. David Suzuki (in Suzuki & Knudtson, 1992) points out that if western science could really deliver the benefits promised to humankind, shouldn’t we have already witnessed this in the 1960’s and 1970’s following industrialization? Yet the ecological impact of industrialized civilization is apparent: global warming, pollution, species extinction, deforestation and so on. Together with industrialization and the ecological impact that began in the 1960s came the conventional thinking that if we teach people about ecological destruction they will be more motivated to act with environmental responsibility (Sobel, 2008). So we are bombarded with knowledge of environmental loss from information-
intensive school curriculums, not to mention the media – which may be creating an increasing sense of anxiety and hopelessness among community members, discouraging environmental action behaviour and encouraging a distancing from the natural world (Nicholsen, 2002; Sobel, 1995; Sobel 2008).

Research suggests that environmental behaviour is less the result of knowledge than it is about particular environmental experiences (Sobel, 2008). In fact, the knowledge of environmental problems has begun to breed ecophobia, as Sobel (1995; 2008) refers to it as, a fear of the natural world. Glen Albrecht (2005) calls the emotional phenomenon solastalgia which he defines as: the loss of control and powerlessness; the loss of solace and sense of place and; melancholia and the loss of hope; all resulting from profound environmental change. How is this hopelessness addressed in education? New research suggests that humankind’s complex psychological relationship to the biophysical environment and the emotional implications of environmental loss seem to be relatively unexplored and unexamined (Kool & Kelsey, 2005; Rogan, O’Connor & Horwitz, 2005; Speldewinde, Cook, Davies, & Weinstein, 2009). How might we change the way we are doing things in EE to make a space for exploring our psychological relationship to the natural environment?

Human beings also experience a range of positive emotions when engaged with the natural environment including wonder, joy and love (Carson, 1956). In fact, our feelings towards the environment may very well be more important than what we know of the environment when it comes to environmental action (Carson,
1956; Macy, 2007; Orr, 1992). Carson (1956) eloquently articulates the relationship between emotions and nature: “Once the emotions have been aroused – a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration, love – then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response” (p. 45). Simply, people need to connect to the Earth and fall in love with it before they will have the desire to save it (Kelsey, 2007; Macy, 2007; Orr, 1992; Orr, 2004; Sobel, 2008).

Expressing emotions (pain or joy), for the natural world where social interaction takes place can be difficult and uncomfortable. Paul Rogat Loeb (1999) suggests that social involvement sometimes entails us seeing ourselves as we truly are, facing issues that we’d rather not, being exposed to suffering that we don’t wish to see, and becoming psychologically vulnerable. Yet, sometimes this vulnerability is beneficial.

To show vulnerability is certainly not considered a virtue when you are trying to defend the environment, when you are trying to promote environmental awareness, but it should be. I think vulnerability is essential because you are sharing the whole idea of what’s most important in the natural environment and that is it’s vulnerability and we are a part of it whether we like it or not. We are a part of it. We are the environment and vulnerability is an essential part of that because vulnerability implies connectedness and dependence on each other, and I think you can get that in Circle better than probably than any format that I’ve experienced vulnerability. (John, February 8, 2011)

Loeb (1999) also suggests that we use our vulnerability to appreciate why compassion has an unequivocal importance in social involvement; specifically,
people are more likely to help out and be agents of change when they are emotionally moved.

**Connecting To Nature**

Research suggests that there is a strong link between childhood nature experiences and adult responsible environmental behaviour (Sobel, 2008). Yet, Louv (2007) writes that children rarely get outside anymore and there seems to be a growing condition of what he calls *nature deficit disorder*. Children rarely experience nature for a number of reasons including: school and time pressure, parents working longer hours, dependence on indoor electronic entertainment and disappearing access to natural areas, among other reasons (Chawla, 2001; Louv, 2007). Louv argues that the reduction of time spent outside is having negative consequences on children’s physical and psychological make-up and so he advocates incorporating nature in educational programs for the benefits of increased self-esteem and motivation. While further investigation is needed, new research shows that we are closer to recognizing the link between a healthy psychological make-up and our experiences and interactions with nature (Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & Leger, 2006). Nature here is defined as the organic world including: ecosystems (e.g. grasslands), habitats (e.g. gardens), single organic entities (e.g. trees) and nature processes (e.g. weather cycles) (Maller et al., 2006).

How do we integrate experiences of nature in education curriculum where learners do not have access to natural world? Living in beautiful British Columbia where the mountains and raging waterfalls are a short car trip away we may not
well imagine what it’s like not to experience nature. I can’t help but wonder about the millions of people that live in human-made concrete jungles. How might we bring nature in the classroom when the access to the natural world is limited? Can we connect to nature through the telling of our nature stories?

Teaching and Learning with Circle

I found few resources available on Circle specifically for its use in education and did not find any peer-reviewed academic journal articles; so it seems the need for this type of study is great. Most Circle practitioners, however, suggest designs that can be incorporated into any setting including the classroom; few seem to advocate Circle strictly for educational purposes.

In *Circle Works: Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness*, Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) introduces Aboriginal culture – philosophy and pedagogy – into the classroom context. She gives specific attention to the Talking Circle as a model of experiential learning to help students learn: to voice from their hearts, to be self-reflective, to be comfortable with silence, and to listen actively to others. She argues that this type of listening is a skill of leadership and prestige recognized by both traditional and professional communities, as well as it is a highly-theorized skill by many therapeutic professionals. Learning this skill requires that we undo our activist mind (that analyzes, competes and fixes problems), and slow down allowing as much time as needed to speak from and listen at a deeper level. Graveline points out, however, that this might not always fit into a classroom time schedule; even so, aboriginal tradition teaches that it is only through time and effort that we become
wise. Graveline’s research is phenomenology-based and documented lived experience, and so it offers practical insight about possibilities, obstacles and strategies in bringing Circle into the educational experience.

Kay Pranis advocates the use of Circle as a restorative justice tool in an educational setting. In *The Little Book of Circle Processes* (2005) she gives an example of a boy who threatened to burn down his elementary school following a recess incident which resulted in a great deal of conflict between this student and the others the threat involved. Circle was utilized so the other students could express their feelings about how the threat impacted them which helped the boy understand how his behaviour affected them. Through meaningful speaking and respectful listening the students were able to resolve the conflict between them. I discovered in May 2011 that Pranis facilitated a restorative justice Circle workshop on Bowen Island, British Columbia (sponsored by North Shore Restorative Justice), at which the Bowen Island Community School Parent Advisory Council sponsored its teaching staff to attend; which validates that Pranis is still actively involved with this work (A. Layzell, personal communication, May 16, 2011).

Three inspirational sources for Circle’s tangible use in diverse educational settings came from: interviewing two subject experts, Lori and Doyle and; conversing with Hilary Leighton, Director of Continuing Studies at Royal Roads University (RRU). All are educators who have incorporated Circle within different levels of the education system for years.
Lori is a credentialed trainer and facilitator of the ‘Way of Council’, a Circle process that comes out of The Ojai Foundation in California, and is well-experienced using it in an educational setting. For example, Lori spent years working at Palms Middle School in Los Angeles where the process was introduced in the school district in the aftermath of the Rodney King\textsuperscript{19} trial and riots that caused racial tension and division among students. Lori provided me with a copy of the Los Angeles Unified School District 2008-2009 Evaluation Report, submitted by Barbara Dietsch and Noraini Abdullah-Welsh (2009), on the use of council in several Los Angeles schools. The purpose of the report was to determine the degree to which council had become a sustainable practice in the schools. Parents, teachers, administrators, principals and students all completed surveys to assess their perceptions of its value and effectiveness. The surveys reported an overall positive perception of the practice and noted its contribution to: improve disciplinary referrals and lessen fights on campus and; better social skills among students including listening, public speaking and negotiating personal conflicts. There was overwhelming support to continue council from the teachers who said it made their classroom a better place. They reported using it mostly to provide students with opportunities to speak about and deal with issues and concerns arising in the classroom, school, community and world. The most positive impact reported by students was a better understanding of their peers and getting along better with

\textsuperscript{19} A well-known case trial involving police brutality involving the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and Rodney King. The LAPD repeatedly battered King with their batons, while other officers stood watching, and a portion of the event was filmed by a bystander. The footage was aired by news agencies around the world causing public outrage, racial tension, violence and the famous riot of 1992 between the black community and the LAPD.
their friends and teachers. The leading benefits from council revealed by the survey were an overall increase of a positive school climate and feelings of school connectedness.

The nature of Circle is that it is part of nature and is found everywhere in physical representation and [it] is natural to our own human nature because there is this longing for connection and a longing for belonging one might say; a longing for community that is both created and nourished in Circle. (L. Austein, personal communication, February 1, 2011)

Doyle’s first working experience of Circle was in the 1980s when he was contracted to provide training services with the Stó:lō First Nations people in Chilliwack, British Columbia. His first consultation with this aboriginal community was done in Circle, after which he adapted his training sessions to be held in Circle as he worked with them over the next seven years. Around the same time, he also adapted the process for teaching social work courses at the University of the Fraser Valley and his work in many of his other contracts. Doyle found that it fit very well with his style and the subject matter he taught which mainly was to do with family dynamics, relationships and interpersonal communication. Doyle utilized Circle in education for numerous purposes including: as a check-in for students to express their feelings about the learning and course load, to explore personal issues perhaps triggered by the learning material, to debrief after intense experiences, to witness what the students were learning, for team building, among others. Doyle expressed that all kinds of incredible discussions (that you can’t find in textbooks – textbooks might stimulate a discussion), often occurred in Circle, and that much learning (often the ‘real’ learning according to Doyle), took place within it.
When you get all sorts of people sharing about family or group [in Circle], people are going, “Oh I never knew this”, “I never heard this”. It gives them an understanding and some insights about how this person puts their frame of references together and their worldview. It doesn’t matter who the person is, no matter their role or how important they think they are, they still have a point of view and it’s valid. You have to have a way to hear it! The Circle provides that because again the rules are so simple: If you have the rock you have the floor, or you listen. The other thing is, when things got hard the Circle was there to support. It became real. It became the therapeutic moment. It became the support. I just found it really powerful, for me personally and the feedback that I got back from the folks in the Circle [was that] it was powerful, [and] that was what they remembered. And because of that Circle, they remembered and learned a lot of the things that got discussed. In fact, a number of my students and foster parents, mentioned how [when] they got into a contentious issue they were saying “where’s the rock, we need the rock”, they would form a Circle to sort out what the issue was. It became a part of who they were. It became part of their ethic. (D. Clifton, personal communication, February 3, 2011)

Hilary has created another application of Circle in an educative setting in the Employment Skills Access Program, a government funded career transition certificate program at Continuing Studies at Royal Roads University for unemployed and under skilled workers. Participants are required to complete a number of core competencies within the program including the week long intensive focus on job search and transition, real life interviews with employers, applied supervisory skills training, and in addition, they receive career coaching. A particular aspect of this program, is to focus on the participants past experiences as accomplishments rather than what they may come to the program with, which is a sense of having failed. At the end of the three months program, the cohort gathers for a capstone to review and share what they have learned and to celebrate their
successes. On the final day, a council is called. Three rounds of questions ensue. The first question asks about what was most challenging about the program. The next covers the highlights of the program and what next steps each participant will take. And the final question and the most popular is, “As you are writing the book of your life right now, what would this chapter be called?” Hilary has found that rarely does anyone pass at this question; rather, they are eager to share their rich responses. The council is closed with one final piece of homework to go home and write that chapter themselves in terms of their accomplishments. And in that way, the journey continues long after the Circle has closed (H. Leighton, personal communication, June 11, 2011).

When people choose to stay in the heat of the emotionality or the emotions that are evoked in Circle, it has been my experience that, especially the people that are most resistant, have an incredible transformative experience for them selves in a sense that once their hearts break open, they open up to the possibilities, rather than stay stuck on the story, about right or wrong, about what has to happen. These are the same people who usually like an agenda and they like an outcome. We can never really guarantee what will happen when we go into these places, that uncharted terrain of the human psyche, especially in a reflective situation when we are all really opening up our hearts. You never know what is going to happen - that’s the beauty of this work. (H. Leighton, personal communication, June 11, 2011)
Chapter Six: Putting Circle to Action in Environmental Education

Jean Bolen’s (1999) *The Millionth Circle*, introduces the idea that we can change ourselves and the world by being in Circle. Bolen proposes that we can end the patriarchal era we live in and enter into a feminine one associated with compassion and the indigenous wisdom that we are connected to all living things on the planet. Her vision is based on the hypothesis that when a critical number of people change the way they think and behave, entire cultures will do so also. Her hypothesis comes from Rupert Sheldrake’s Morphic Field Theory (in Bolen, 1999), which is the story about monkeys on an island off the shore of Japan. Bolen describes how scientists had been studying them for thirty years by luring them from the trees to the open beach with sweet potatoes. One day a monkey they named Imo started to wash her sweet potato in the ocean before eating it and showed this behaviour to other monkeys that started to do the same, until one day all monkeys on the island were participating in this behaviour. The most fascinating discovery was that monkeys on other islands (that had no direct contact with Imo and her tribe), were also washing their sweet potatoes in the ocean. From this phenomenon came the hypothesis that the behaviour of an entire species changes when an essential mass number is reached. Bolen proposes this number is a “millionth circle” (p.14). Literally, the medium is the message: the Circle is the egalitarian medium to create change that is alternative to patriarchal society, a key ingredient of this change is transforming the way we relate to one another. Bolen
imagines this to be a culture where we listen and learn from everyone in it. She writes:

    Just as relationship skills carry over into circles, there is a vice versa; the circle experience can have a radically positive effect on relationships outside the circle, because it can provide a model – a place to practice honest and caring communication, until this is what you do and expect from others in your life. In this way, it can lead you to change the patriarchal structure of your relationships. As we begin to change our personal relationships, that change spreads. It’s like throwing pebbles in a pond; each one has an impact and an effect, with concentric rings of change rippling out and affecting other relationships. (1998, p.16)

I entered Royal Road University’s Master of Arts in Environmental Education and Communication (MAEEC) program in the summer of 2009 holding Bolen’s torch of changing the world through Circle, and would begin to experience the potential for Circle within academia.

    Whether or not other MAEEC students were conscious of it, we naturally arranged ourselves in a circular fashion when engaged in discussions. Sitting this way made it easier to focus on and pay attention to the person speaking. Each person had the opportunity to speak and on some occasions the teacher used a talking piece. There were subtleties of Circle present in the learning we were experiencing; however, we were not practicing the authentic process. Still, there was something different about this approach to education I hadn’t experienced
before. I felt as if we were meeting as equal minds. It seemed that how we arranged ourselves influenced the way we connected and interacted with each other (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010); and it also seemed to influence the way I learned. Circular discussions opened my mind to experiential, participatory learning unlike the traditional learning models I was previously exposed to.

Environmental educators have long looked for new ways of teaching and learning that are unlike traditionally teacher-led, knowledge-orientated educational models, but rather more experience-based participatory learning (Capra, 2001; Orr, 1992). John Dewey (1938), a recognized educational theorist of the twentieth century, holds the position that experience is the only true learning situation; that education, whether traditional or progressive, is inadequate without incorporating experiential learning.

I decided to put the idea of Circle as an experiential learning tool in EE to the test. For an assignment, I called and hosted a Circle with members of my cohort during a fieldtrip to Botanical Beach on August 2nd, 2009. I learned that it is possible to adapt the process when limited by time. For instance, some Circles take weeks to form including: solidifying people’s commitment, building trust, forming and agreeing on guidelines and practices, etc. (Baldwin, 1998; Bolen, 1999).

The Botanical Beach experiment helped me to understand more deeply the importance of simply ‘calling’ an impromptu Circle. ‘Calling’ is the invitation process of gathering people together for a shared purpose. Most Circles are formed organically when people are drawn together about matters important to them. I was
limited to my cohort members as participants so the calling process was not authentically organic; however, I did leave it up to each cohort member to feel moved whether to participate or not. I wondered, “Does the way you call people to Circle influence who shows up?” I called some people face-to-face and advised others by email. Some I gave minimal information to and others received more of a description. It’s difficult to say if this made a difference to whether people participated or not, as other factors played a role, not least of which was that not everyone in my cohort went on the fieldtrip. Nevertheless, this experience enabled me to reflect on how I might design a research Circle that kept true to an organic process, and yet was standardized enough to make it a reliable case to study. I also learned that no one can predict what will happen in any given Circle, no matter how they are called or what fixed practices are applied, because no two are ever alike (Pranis, Stuart & Wedge, 2003), and whomever is meant to be there, will be there (Baldwin, 1998; Bolen, 1999), and whatever is meant to happen will happen.

As an environmental educator and communicator, I asked myself this question (given what I knew so far), “How can Circle empower hopeful, resilient, competent individuals to deal with ecological crises?” After some self reflection, I realized my own hope and resiliency comes when I feel connected to myself, to others and to the larger universe; and in the process of Circle, I can feel this connection.

I am not alone in the thinking that Circle can empower well-being and competency to engage in environmental action. In Calling the Circle, Christina
Baldwin (1998) writes about how in the premise of uncertainty and fear (that even environmental degradation stories bring us), we seek social and spiritual forms that help us address problems and find answers (p.11). Baldwin introduces Circle into mainstream society in her latest book, *The Circle Way*, with co-author Anne Linnea, so that “anyone, anywhere, can have a meaningful conversation and rise with support to do what needs to be done” (2010, p. xiii). Joanna Macy (2007) also uses the Circle model to empower well-being and competency to deal with environmental issues. Her celebrated design, the *Council of all Beings*, allows participants to let other life forms speak through them in order to feel and express the pain and power that comes with knowing our interconnectedness with all life (Seed, 1988, p. 7). For example, a participant might return after some time out in the natural world and speak in the council as the voice of the tree or the ocean or the moss. The identification with another living being powerfully demonstrates our interconnectedness and through this experience people are empowered to transform their relationships with the natural world (Macy & Brown, 1998). John Seed (1988) describes this council as a means to “hear within ourselves the sounds of the Earth crying”, a beautiful phrase he borrowed from Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh (p.5). In his experience, people who participate in the council, experience a deepening identification with the Earth and gain a renewal of energy to work for the protection and harmony of nature. I can agree. I was first introduced to Macy’s design by Hilary Leighton in 2010. Together, we called a *Council of all Beings* for the MAEEC students and staff to attend (see Appendix B). I would later experience
this council for the second time at the *Way of Council I* workshop in November 2010. My experience of the *Council of all Beings* was that through the sharing of profound nature experiences with others, my relationship to the natural world seemed to become more solid, valuable, and real. The experience also taught me something about EE – that just like Circle, EE ought to include making space for everyone to be heard including the voice of nature.
Chapter Seven: Imagining an Ecological Identity Circle

In Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist, Mitchell Thomashow (1995) introduces the concept of ecological identity, a term to sum up all the different ways we understand ourselves in relationship to the Earth; that is, our values, beliefs, ideals, motivations, background, etc. that make up our ecological worldview. He writes, “My purpose in the class...to show how an ecological worldview can be used to interpret personal experience, and how that interpretation leads to a new way of understanding personal identity. I call this process ecological identity work.” (p.2). He goes on to say, that our ecological identity empowers us to live sustainably: to volunteer, create professions, etc. and make every day decisions that consider the environment. He believes that we can change our behaviour and edify our relationship to the Earth when we deeply explore ecological concepts embedded in self. The notion of ecological identity seemed to fit well with my overall research objectives, and so I dug deeper.

Swift & Sewall (2000) assert that we are the embedded self inescapable from the world we sense around us, like the breathing in and out of air in our lungs we are connected to our experiences on the Earth. I understand that one’s sense of self is influenced by what one pays attention to therefore, if we pay attention to our ecological ideas, values and experiences, we may discover our ecological selves.

The Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess (Drengsen & Devall, 2008), was the first to coin the term “ecological self” (p. 29), to describe our identification with the natural world and all living beings. He believed that when we identify with our
ecological self, we undergo a process of self-realization, as we awaken to the interconnectedness of all living beings and become conscious of something bigger than our own ego; and through this experience we can then feel compassion (an ethic of outward self-love), for the ecological world.

Joanna Macy (2007) sees the shifting of our identity to encompass the non-human world as a spiritual change generated by the interconnectedness we experience with all beings.

The conventional notion of the self with which we have been raised and to which we have been conditioned by mainstream culture is being undermined...It is being replaced by wider constructs of identity and self-interest – by what philosopher Arne Naess termed the ecological self, co-extensive with other beings and the life of our planet. It is what I like to call “the greening of the self.” (p. 148)

Macy is convinced that becoming this expanded self (which enables compassion for the ecological world), is the only way we can adequately address ecological matters. Where Macy diverges from Naess is in what happens next. Macy suggests that when we recognize our profound interconnectedness with all beings we experience pain because we live in a time of ecological crisis. She explains further that it is through being present to our pain that we truly demonstrate compassion, for compassion means “suffering with” (1998; p.27), the world.

Likewise, O’Sullivan & Taylor (2004) seem to suggest that we can not distil our pain and grief we experience for the world to the concerns of the individual self
because the story of the Earth is our story and vice versa. They explain that to
grasp ecological identity we must be able to perceive self as connected to the wider
ecological community, as if nature and psyche are of the same essence. “This sense
of the specialness or privileged nature of all that exists means that ‘the
environment’ or ‘the world at large’ is experienced not as a mere backdrop, but
rather as Being” (p.15). This entails the reinventing of ourselves to create a
mutually enhancing relationship with the Earth, claims Thomas Berry (1999), in
his book, The Great Work. The title of this book also refers to the work of creating
new relationships where all members of the Earth’s community have a role to fulfill,
and a voice to be recognized as inherently valuable.

I am in the Earth and the Earth is in me.
We are all connected. I am connected to trees, to animals, to water and all
life on this planet. I know this and fully understand it somewhere deep
inside of me, but I may not always feel it or know how to transpire this
knowing.

This art piece entitled, “My Ecological Identity” was created December 06, 2010 to reflect on perceiving the Earth
and all life forms as an extension of self.
To incorporate this profound learning into my research I leaned on three common themes that emerge as we reflect on our connection to the natural world, which Thomashow (1995; p.8-18), titles:

- “Childhood Memories of Special Places”
- “Perceptions of Disturbed Places”
- “Contemplation of Wild Spaces”

Thomashow contends that these themes hold memories for us that matter a great deal in the way they serve to connect us to the Earth, to discover wonder and open-mindedness about nature and to appreciate the magnitude of ecological change. He writes, “It is the stories of environmental experiences that link people together. Through stories, people recall memories and impressions of nature, and unlock, the basis of their values and commitments, perhaps revealing a new interpretation, in conjunction with their colleagues” (p.7). This suggests that ecological identity not only involves internalizing experiences, but bringing them out to be shared within a social realm for full impact. What might there be realized when we experience ecological identity in a collective setting?
Chapter Eight: Circle as a Case Study

Using Thomashow’s themes I generated deeply reflective questions and designed the *Earth Speak Circle* to test my hypothesis that Circle can be an effective methodology for environmental education. The intention to gather people together was to speak and listen from the heart about meaningful experiences in nature and the things that matter most about the planet Earth. Prior to commencing the case study, an ethical review request was submitted to the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board; and the research approved.

While I attempted to objectively observe this Circle in order to accurately and reliably record the data, I admit my limitations as I was at once both the Circle facilitator and participant in the process. Further, as someone with experience in Circle with a proclivity to bring this type of communication tool and process to education, I am of course biased in some way towards this method. And not least of all, when I began this process I felt some trepidation towards leading this case study Circle as I feel I am still learning this process and by no means an expert.

The Circle took place in four sessions once a month from November 2010 to February 2011 – long enough to have a qualified experience and short enough for anyone to commit to participating in all four sessions. Each session was two hours long in order for everyone to share adequately before individual or group energy waned. Research participants were recruited by the method of an electronic mail out invitation to over 200 people. Recipients were instructed to forward this email so it is difficult to know how many people actually received the invitation in the
end. Both adult women and men were recruited within this criteria: willingness to commit to approximately 10 hours over four months, be 18 years of age or older, be connected to environmental education and communication in some way (whether formally or informally), or simply be interested in environmental thinking and action.

The parameters of this research specified 5-12 research participants to keep the group to a workable size. Nine people originally responded and committed to the project, 2 dropped out before it began; therefore a total of 7 people (2 men and 5 women) participated. While I admit this may not be a large sampling of the population, it is an appropriate and viable number of participants for a well-functioning Circle which typically allows for between 5-25 participants in order to be effective. There was a technical exception: 2 participants missed one Circle session each for personal reasons. I do not feel this made much difference in their capacity to contribute to my research as the questions they were given (questionnaire and phone interview) following the case study were still pertinent to the Circle experience they did have.

The ideal space to host the Circle, in my opinion, would have been in the outdoors; however, being that the case study took place during winter, I looked for an indoor environment that was neutral, community-oriented, quiet and inviting. So the Circle was held in the back room of a community library where we would not be disturbed. For the reason that the room was large and open, I used several items to create a more contained, warm and cozy space. These included quilts and pillows
where we would sit; and softer lighting for ambience including table lamps and white lights. Objects were placed in the center including a bowl of rocks and water (for the opening dedication) and several talking pieces mostly ecological finds like rocks and sticks. In actuality, at the first session I also included human-made talking pieces like a key, crystal ball, etc., but found that participants only picked up the ecological finds – so for the next three sessions I brought only the latter, which made better sense in retrospect, as the intention and questions were all framed around nature. The December session was slightly different with fresh boughs of cedar and coloured Christmas lights to give holiday warmth. Food and beverages were provided at each session such as fruit, nuts, home-made cookies, veggies, and desserts.

I have found that creating Circle spaces involves practicing hospitality and generosity. There is something about food and Circle that go hand in hand. Food provides nourishment for the body while Circle’s way of being together seems to nourish the soul.

21 The Earth Speak Circle environment.
For the reason that several participants were new to the Circle experience, I felt it best to include an introduction of the process before diving into the exercises. At the first session, I took about 30 minutes to explain what Circle constitutes as (see chapter four). I provided a handout package for the participants in which they could go back and reference their learning later. It was my hope that the group would gain enough knowledge and feel competent from their Circle experience to be able to apply the process in their professional and personal lives.22

In order to create the conditions for participants to enter a more heightened awareness of self and other that Circle can foster (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996), I incorporated different rituals to help transition the group into this space including: the lighting of a candle, a guided breathing meditation and the sound of an instrument. By ritual I mean to say, in the context of learning, ritual as a process of initiation that includes three phases (van Gennep as cited in Halifax, in Glazer, ed., 1999), including the separation or moving away from one’s familiar territory or culture to a kind of threshold experience where bearing witness to a story that is unfolding marks a transformation of some sort, and finally a reincorporation or return to the every day once the process has ended. So for example, these rituals clearly separated the regular social space where introductions were made and the research was addressed, from the space where we engaged in Circle, a more sacred space where we asked and answered deeper questions. In one instance, for example, I lit the candle to denote our leaving the mundane to enter a more contained space,

22 My hope for the four participants who had no experience leading Circle, was that they would feel competent to do so after experiencing the sessions, while the three other more seasoned Circle participants might be inspired to use this process in their work and lives more often.
and kept the candle lit throughout the experience, and finally blowing it out at the close as we moved to re-enter our lives.

A short 10 minute break was given at each Circle session allowing participants to regain energy, unwind and eat something before diving deeper in the process. The break time also allowed the group to socialize apart from the intense space of Circle, which I sensed added to their overall comfort level with each other and with me. For the reason that I was both the facilitator and a participant of the case study Circle process it was impossible for me to record detailed observations of what was said in each session. So I briefly outline what took place in each session, and do not go into much detail here.

**The November Circle**

I began the first session by introducing myself and my thesis research. I then invited everyone to introduce themselves to each other and state the reason why they decided to participate in the case study. The majority of participants shared that they chose to attend to learn more about Circle and how it might be applied in the environmental field. After introductions I talked about what Circle is, its principles and practices, and how we would engage in the process over the next four months. A break took place before the more sacred space of Circle opened with a dedication.

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23 There was a level of ‘confidentiality’ that had to be maintained, in order to stay as true to Circle as possible even though the confidentiality guideline had to be breached somewhat in order to collect data for research purposes. I made it clear to the case study participants that my written observations would be minimal and confidential, and that the study mainly depended on their feedback in the form of a questionnaire and phone interview.
In the first round the group was asked to describe their first recollection of being in nature. I spoke first and passed the talking piece to the left until everyone had opportunity to speak. When the piece returned to me I shared something else and encouraged the participants to share again if they felt they had something to add or to just pass the piece along. When this question was exhausted, the second question was raised, “What is it you love about Earth?” The popcorn method\textsuperscript{24} of speaking was introduced at this point and utilized for this round.

Tonight in the Earth Speak Circle I heard someone say that they love the way they slow down when in nature and this 'slowing down' helps them to better see what's around them. I also heard statements like "I love the colors I see in nature!" and "I love that nature is imperfect!" It really resonated with me to hear someone say they love nature for its calming effect and because it is the one place where they don't have to be so in 'control'!

In the final round the following question was asked, “What contribution do you bring to this world, a special gift that you have that no one else can give, that dies when you die?” After each participant shared to their heart’s content, the Circle was closed with a chime and a verbal cue.

**The December Circle**

I began by reviewing the first session and revisited Circle principles that needed further explanation. I then spent some time introducing the concept of the ecological self and how I incorporated ecological identity concepts into the Earth Speak Circle. Then I facilitated a silent listening activity to empower deeper listening among the participants with each other. Starting with myself, each person

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\textsuperscript{24} See page 27 for a description of the popcorn method in more detail.
held on to the talking piece until they felt the regard of each other present (in complete silence), before passing the piece to their left. After the exercise I asked for feedback. One person expressed that the process felt uncomfortable, in particular ‘holding eye contact’, because this is not how we usually engage with people. Another person expressed that they liked how the process reminded them of how when speaking we are not just talking to a group of people, but to separate individuals as well.

Next, I held an informal round of “checking-in” for each person to share briefly where they were at in their life currently – as I felt this would help the participants be more fully present and connected and comfortable with each other in the rounds to follow. Then the Circle was formally opened with a ritual and a dedication.

Participants listened as I read a Sufi story about a stream (see Appendix C), that starts off as a magnificent waterfall then moving across different landscapes, until either becoming a quagmire or evaporating into the air and carried over the desert and so on. The story describes different stages of a stream’s life in which people can tend to resonate their own human experiences with. When the story was over, the following questions were asked, “At what point did you enter the story?” and “What part of the story resonated most strongly with you and why?” The story was read for a second time and the questions repeated. The popcorn method of

25 “Checking-in” is an exercise where people get to speak about whatever it is that they are currently up to or dealing with in their present lives, be it mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or physically. It allows participants to bring themselves more fully into Circle, by talking about what is relevant to them apart from what is taking place in Circle.
speaking was used to engage in meaningful sharing and we continued with this
method to reflect on the next question, “Are you happy with your relationship to the
Earth?”

After the break, a Fishbowl Circle was used to explore the question, “How do
you feel about the future state of the planet?” The group was split into two, with one
half volunteering to speak from a place of hope and the other from a place of despair
or grief. We began with the latter speaking as they sat in an inner circle surrounded
by the former. These participants were asked to voice feelings of despair or grief for
the planet, choosing to represent their own voice or the voices of others or the planet
itself.

Tonight I heard strong words like rape used to describe humankind’s
relationship to the natural world. Some spoke of present and future human
suffering and the unclear future for the human race. Stories of the
degradation of the natural world and the loss of significant life forms,
such as favourite trees cut down, were told. Words like power, control,
blind, and human-centered were used to convey the dominant worldview of
our time that threatens our planet. Tears were shed...

When the inner group was finished speaking, the outer group shared what
most resonated with them from what they witnessed being said. Then the two
groups exchanged places, from inner to outer and outer to inner, with the voice in
the center now one from a place of hope.

...Later several people spoke about the continuance of life on the planet, its
old age and resilience. I was encouraged to hear someone say that many
civilizations have come and gone yet the Earth remains! I heard again, the
Earth will endure! It was nourishing to my soul to hear statements of hope
like “people are waking up”, “the paradigm shift is happening now!”, “no
matter how far we venture down the wrong road, we can always turn
around” and “this planet will sustain life because that’s what it’s designed to do and it will continue to do so for millions of years!” I felt especially hopeful when I heard one participant say to another, “I am so glad you brought that up, I feel much better now!”

Again, when the inner group was finished speaking, the outer group shared what most resonated with them from what they witnessed being said. We ended on this hopeful note,26 closing the Circle with group members holding hands and saying in unison, “Namaste”27.

The January Circle

I decided from this session onward to keep the Circle format simple, for the reason that I wondered if incorporating different formats like the Fishbowl Circle in session two was confusing to participants or taking away from their overall experience of deep speaking and listening, especially for those new to the process. I also switched my attention from ‘teaching Circle’ to that of ‘experiencing Circle’.

In this session (and February), each round to ensue utilized the popcorn method of speaking with the talking piece passed to the left following the first person moved to speak, until everyone had opportunity to speak. Opening and closing the Circle space also took place before and after the deep questions were raised, and a break given around the half-way mark.

26 For the reason that Circles sometimes move people to explore deep emotional territories, we end Circle on a hopeful note, bringing people back to a place of ‘wellness’ before closing Circle and sending them out from the process; this means, ending on the more light, playful, fun, hopeful, positive topic/question. I learned this at the Way of Council I training workshop and from my subject interviewees.

27 A common Hindi salutation that simply means “the divine in me sees the divine in thee” as I understand it. There are slightly different interpretations of this salutation, such as “the God/Goddess spirit within me recognizes and honors the God/Goddess within you” as found here: http://healing.about.com/od/n/g/g_namaste.htm
In the first round, participants were asked to share a memory or a story about an experience in the wilderness, or a wild space, or with a wild being. In the second round, participants were asked, “Think of someone with whom you find it difficult to share your concerns and what matters most about the environment with – in talking with them about the Earth, the environment, what would you like them to know?” One more round took place with the question, “How do you now, at this point in your lifetime, understand how you contribute to the healing of the planet Earth?” Then the Circle was closed with a verbal cue and the sound of an instrument.

The February Circle

Session four assumed the same format as session three, with one exception: a recording device was used to document each participant’s answers to questions two and three asked in Circle (with the permission of all participants present). For the reason that a recording device was used, I did not record written observations so that I could engage more fully into the process. However, the recording turned out to be of very poor quality. The recording device was placed in the center of the Circle, as to not to distract the participants from deeply speaking, as sometimes when we know we are being recorded we ‘put on a show’ in a manner of speaking, and do not share as authentically as we might otherwise. I assumed the device would pick up each person’s voice from this location, but it only picked up those who spoke more loudly and more clearly; thus, made the transcribing of the verbal data difficult and made for gaps in the data for what had transpired here.
In the first round, participants were asked to share a story of an experience they had in nature that has stayed in their memory forever. In round two, participants were asked to share what it has meant to them to speak and be listened to from the heart in Circle about meaningful experience of nature and the things that matter to you most about the planet. Finally, in round three, participants were asked, “What do you take away with you from this Circle?” After everyone was finished sharing to their heart’s content, the Circle was closed.

What do I take away with me from the Earth Speak Circle experience? I am still wondering about attentive listening and how I might as a Circle facilitator better empower participants to be more aware of what and how they contribute in the process. I noticed that it was difficult for some to transition between the way we speak and listen in mundane social spaces to the way of being together in the more sacred space of Circle. At one point, I even instructed the participants to give about 20-30 seconds of silence between one person talking and the next. This is a way we can show others that we have been deeply listening to them; the pause also allows time to process what was just said. As the facilitator, it was not always easy to know when to intercede to emphasize speaking one at a time. How might the way we listen to each other change as we become more accustomed to the Circle process? How long might it take for a group to experience Circle until its way of listening becomes a part of who they are, and until a group facilitator is no longer required to intercede?

Collecting the Circle Experience

While it was my hope to also collect the case study participants’ original reflections about their experience as they spoke about it in the last Circle session, foundationally my research findings were for the most part taken from data collected from the questionnaires and phone interviews. At the last session,

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28 This question is a combination of my research questionnaire’s questions, numbers two and three; the total of which was handed out to participants following the final Circle session.
participants were given a questionnaire with four questions to reflect on. The first question asked simply to describe their experience of Circle. The next two questions were, “What does it mean to you to speak and listen from the heart about meaningful experiences in nature?” and “What does it mean to you to speak and listen from the heart about the things that matter to you most about the planet?” Finally, the fourth question was drawn from my over-arching research question, “Based on your experience, is Circle an effective methodology for environmental education?” The case study participants were somewhat confused by this last question, as the term EE was not familiar to them. In hindsight, I would have taken out the word ‘education’ in order to facilitate a wider response for how Circle may be an effective methodology for listening to environmental concerns.

Participants took roughly 2-4 weeks to return their written contributions, after which a phone interview took place to clarify written answers and to give each participant an opportunity to reflect more deeply and to express themselves verbally as the four questions were again asked. The phone interviews were recorded and transcribed. A profile was crafted for each participant in order to bring the written and verbatim data to life (Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) writes that this approach is like telling a story about the research subject and a good way to summarize what they have learned from lived experience; thus, it seemed to fit well with my study. Each participant approved their character profile as correct, accurate, and as thoroughly describing their experience of the Earth Speak Circle as best as possible, including the quotes selected to support their experience and to
represent their voice; all of which was done by a process of mailing back and forth
electronic mail, until the final edits were approved and permission to use was given.
These profiles are the foundation and source for all the data included and
interpreted from the case study in this research paper (see Appendix D). Finally,
each participant is identified in this paper by their real first name (only) with
permission.
Chapter Nine: Interviewing the Lived Experience

To add more depth to this research and to have a wider understanding of the implications of Circle in education, in addition to my Earth Speak Circle, I decided to interview several people with knowledge of and experience with Circle. It made sense to use a semi-structured interview process as a research method, as at the root of interviewing is the search to understand the lived experience of people and the meaning they make from their experiences (Seidman, 2006). Before the interviews took place, an ethical review request was submitted to the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board; and the research approved.

I came to know each interviewee at some point over the last five years through work or school. Upon discussing my thesis topic with each of them at some point following the summer of 2010, I learned that they utilized Circle in their professional lives in some fashion. I then asked if each were willing to be interviewed about their experience of Circle for research purposes, and each willingly and enthusiastically agreed to do so. Each interviewee is identified by their real names in this paper with permission.

The semi-structured interviews were held in January and February of 2011. A month prior to each interview, interviewees were given the exact questions to be asked in order to provide enough time for reflection – keeping in mind that a good interview is structured to allow one to reflect upon their life experiences (Seidman, 2006). Also important was to be in an atmosphere away from distractions so that one’s authentic narrative position could come through (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995;
Seidman, 2006); therefore each interviewee was directly responsible for choosing their interview atmosphere and each chose their private home setting.

The interview questions were slightly different from the *Earth Speak Circle’s*. At the same time, I kept them as similar as possible. For the reason that different people have slightly different ideas about Circle, question two was asked to clarify their understanding of Circle. The four questions were:

1. Describe your experience of Circle.
2. Based on your experience, what is the nature of Circle?
3. What does it mean to you to speak and listen from the heart in Circle?
4. Based on your experience, is Circle an effective methodology for EE?

The semi-structured interviews with subject experts were regarded as part of my literary review in order to accumulate a well-rounded and applied knowledge of Circle, its context, application, and overall significance. Each interview was recorded and transcribed and the transcripts returned to interviewees to ensure accuracy and approval. Any passage or description of the interviewee selected for research purposes was approved by the contributor by process of mailing back and forth by electronic mail, until the final edits were approved and permission to use was given.

I conducted the interview process just as I would if I were facilitating a Circle between two people.29 At the beginning of each interview, the respondents were given the option to use a talking piece or give a verbal cue in lieu of when finished

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29 Christina Baldwin (1998) in *Calling the Circle* suggests that Circle’s principles and practices can be used between two people or applied to a group; it’s the same process no matter how many people are present.
speaking. Other Circle principles emphasized in the interview were: to speak from the heart and from the ‘I’ experience, the practice of slowing down to speak, the welcome of pauses and silence, honouring storytelling and the practice of being open to whatever surfaces as valuable and meaningful information.

Hosting the interviews as if facilitating Circle helped me to define my role as the interviewer. Holstein & Gubrium (1995) write that in conventional interviews, the interviewer attempts to shake off self-consciousness, suppress personal opinions, avoid stereotyping and control the process by using prompts to facilitate candid expressions, opinions and sentiments from the respondents. Seidman (2006) points out that listening attentively is the most difficult part of an interview – including avoiding interrupting the interviewee and reinforcing their responses with positive or negative reactions. The decision to hold myself in the interview as if facilitating Circle helped me to practice attentive listening, keeping my reactions and prompts in check. I also adopted Holstein and Gubrium’s take that the interviewee is a storyteller, no matter who they are, their competency depends on the story they tell – because everyone has a story to tell!

In using Circle principles to interview participants, one person mentioned they had not heard of Circle being practiced between only two people as an interview process. Another interviewee did not understand Circle as a tool or methodology, but rather had come to know it as an approach or way of being. Nevertheless, each interviewee agreed that the principles of Circle also apply and hold true to the interview process. I found that each person spoke candidly and from
the heart as if they were in fact, in Circle. I would be interested in further exploring a Circle model for qualitative interviewing in future studies.
Chapter Ten: The Importance of Being Heard

My life experiences and research led me to Gabor Maté’s *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* (2008), in which he richly describes lives of addicts, roots of addiction in our society and what is needed to transcend this painful way of being. Maté’s insight into the world of addiction seemed to compliment my research into creating spaces for everyone to be heard when dealing with environmental matters.

There needs to be room for everyone to have a say including the ‘addicts’ or ‘unloveables’ in our society. We can’t expect these people to come to us, we need to seek them out and include them! If we do not create spaces where we can engage and interact with everyone we will not succeed in creating sustainable communities. And who is the addict? Are we not living in an addicted society – all of us addicted to fossil fuels, energy consumption, internet and social media use, among others?

Maté suggests that unconditional acceptance of each other is one of the greatest challenges we humans face and few of us have experienced it, least of all the addict. This begs the question, “What is unconditional acceptance?” I imagine it

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This art piece entitled, “The Lone Wolf & Circle”, was created November 29, 2010 to reflect on what I view as my ‘unloveable self’ to empathize with the notion that everyone is deserving of compassion and unconditional acceptance.
as being heard no matter what you have to say, good, bad or ugly; for when I think of addiction and painful experiences in my life, they seem connected with not being heard.

Being heard, in my understanding, is having the opportunity to openly express one’s thoughts or feelings in the audience of others who attentively listen without casting judgment. Maté (2008) says that not being heard is an emotionally crippling experience shared by all humans, the epitome of which are the addicts that have emotionally shut down, lost their capacity to feel emotions and encounter a sense of emptiness on a daily basis. It becomes obvious when we consider the addict and as we look inward to our own human experience that people do not want to be overlooked, ignored, silenced, shutdown, judged or excluded. It is not surprising to find Circle practices present in AA, NA, Al-non and other support groups that include the 12-step recovery program.

Is it possible that we lose our capacity to feel emotions and shut down around environmental matters if we do not have the opportunity to voice our deep emotional responses to the degradation and injustices we witness happening in the natural world? Could Circle be utilized as a ‘twelve step program’ of sorts for environmentally minded individuals or environmentalists?

How do we create spaces where people can have the opportunity to be heard? Addictions, criminal activity and social conflict appear to be some of consequences of not creating these spaces. Someone who seems to understand this well is Darryl, a man I interviewed about his work delivering a restorative justice program using Circle in the community. The organization (he began volunteering with in 2006 and
later staffed in 2008), employs this practice to resolve conflict between community members where harm against persons have taken place. Darryl passionately expressed his experience of Circle:

You know, maybe that the thing there, that it has the ability to meet so many different needs, almost an all encompassing way of meeting human needs, because without the mattering and without belonging, a human being is essentially a dead zone in a way. As I understand it, that was essentially the ultimate punishment anyone could ever be dealt in an indigenous culture, was to be expelled from the group and would likely face death as a result. So, I still see that today, the belonging and mattering that are missing from so many of the referrals that come our way. Circle is a great image of belonging. (D. Gehlen, personal communication, January 27, 2011)

Belonging to a community is important for our developmental growth and well-being. In his book, Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times, Paul Rogat Loeb (1999) describes how it is through our interactions with the human and the natural world that individual growth is possible. Through interacting with others, he writes, “we know the virtue of learning to voice our needs, fight for our choices, recover from psychological intimidation” and this process is much like a “stretching of the soul” where we become increasingly conscious of who we are (p.27-28).

Criminal justice professionals recognize the positive effects of listening and learning from everyone present as exceptionally valuable in dealing with all types of crimes and crisis. Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge are leaders in empowering Circles in the justice system and describe the process in their book
Peacemaking Circles: from Crime to Community (2003), as a more healing and constructive way to deal with crime and conflict. They define Circles as:

...places of listening – of hearing what it’s like to be someone else. They’re also places for being heard – for expressing what’s on our minds and hearts and having others receive it deeply. Telling our stories in the safe place of the Circles opens windows on each other’s lives, giving us moments when we can witness the path another has walked as well as feel that others appreciate our own path. (p.3)

In Canada, Circles were first introduced into the criminal justice system as an alternative way of sentencing to involve all stakeholders in decisions; however it was soon discovered that Circle could be used for other purposes where criminal justice application is involved (p.21). Today, there are many uses for peace-making Circles within the justice system including: supporting and assisting victims of crime, facilitating the re-entry of offenders back into the community, serving professionals who deal with crime on a daily basis and aiding the restoration of broken relationships within the community resulting from a crime or conflict (Pranis, 2005; Pranis, Stuart & Wedge, 2003).

I felt it valuable to understand what it is about Circle that makes it effective for crime and conflict resolution as various environmental issues involve conflict or harm in some fashion. Peace-making Circles operate from the same fundamental values that all Circles do. Pranis, Stuart and Wedge (2003) say the process is effective for this type of work because it allows everyone to be heard, it takes a
collective approach of accountability to solving problems, and it engages people to positively connect with each other (chiefly through the practice of speaking one at a time and respectfully listening). Kraybill (2004) writes that Circles handle conflict well because they are characteristic of good group process design including: a common purpose to which the group is gathered and a set of procedures that govern group dynamics including self-management and attentive listening guidelines.

Circle as a Compassionate Listening Tool

In order to feel connected and respected, people need to share their stories and feel that others have really listened to them (Pranis, 2005). “Everybody has a story, and everybody wants to tell their story in order to connect. If no one listens, we tell it to ourselves and then we go mad” (Wheatley, 2009, p.93). You might not like what everyone has to say, nor approve of their ideas and behaviours; nonetheless, there needs to be a place for every person to share their story including the people we name outcast, un-loveable, or undesirable. Darryl talks about what is possible when people listen to others:

When either of them is speaking from the head it does shift, you know, a little bit, but not nearly as much as it does when they are speaking from the heart. Then they aren’t just an offender or a victim anymore, now they are showing up as a human being that has a story. And the more that story is told, and the extent to which it has an emotional component to it, the faster it happens that a person becomes a person and not just a victim or an offender. And once a person is known as a human being there’s understanding, and once there is understanding there’s empathy and from empathy comes compassion and then forgiveness. (D. Gehlen, personal communication, January 27, 2011)
“Can you imagine listening to Hitler’s story?” This question was asked at the Way of Council I workshop, by Lori who articulated compassionate listening in this fashion and who practices council as articulated in The Way of Council (1996), as written by Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle. These authors suggest that compassion arises naturally when we practice attentive and respectful listening to other people’s stories and they point to the Quaker meetings as exemplar for practicing compassionate listening. In Introducing Quakers (Gorman, 1969), I looked further to understand what it is about the Quaker meetings that have inspired today’s practice of Circle for practitioners like Zimmerman and Coyle. I found a religious organization that goes back to the 1650’s whose members are appreciated for their individuality as well as their differences, and in which the spirit of community is valued. It further explains how the Quaker community is founded on the belief that people need to love and to be loved in order to be happy and whole people; in addition, we are able to practice love towards all people when we recognize that there is God in everyone. Famous Quaker activist Gene Knudsen Hoffman articulates the essence of Quaker meetings best, “An enemy is simply one whose story we haven’t heard” (Hoffman, 1997, p.1).

It would seem that to create a sustainable community we need to exercise compassion for all involved no matter their role (Loeb, 1999; Macy, 2007; Starhawk, 1982). This includes those we may deem the environmental wrong-doers for whatever reason. If compassion arises naturally within us when we engage in heartfelt listening in Circle (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996), what potential might Circle hold for
creating a sustainable world? How might we listen with compassion to people who have a different story than ours and who might not feel a real connection to the Earth? How might we listen more compassionately to the more-than-human world? What does it mean to listen to the Earth? To what extent do we practice compassion for others and the more-than-human world? This idea of compassionate listening around environmental matters and for those whom these matters involve brings up many questions I am still working through, and I wonder if finding these answers will be a lifetime pursuit.
Chapter Eleven: The Value of Circle for Environmental Education

What I found to be valuable from the case study Circle is supported here by the participants’ own unique voices. Also, woven into this chapter, where applicable, are reflections from the Way of Council I workshop and lessons I gained from the interviews with Circle practitioners.

The Value of Voicing and Listening to Experience

Typically we don’t have the opportunity to share at a deep level and to be listened to in a respectful way; when we do the experience can be transformative and therapeutic. Circle can be an effective communication tool to aid this dialogue.

Most people were there to share their inner thoughts and concerns and having a space to do that. It’s good for me to do that too. I didn’t realize how much I needed to do that until the end of the Circle experience and I thought, “Wow, this is therapy” and that’s terrific. (John, April 3, 2011)

I liked it because these are issues I care about and like to talk about. But typically we don’t get to do this with our friends, because it’s too sensitive, too core, you know. So for me ‘enlightening’ was a different experience than I am use to and I appreciated talking about things I care about. (Mark, March 7, 2011)

Sharing our thoughts and feelings about the environment is valuable in empowering wellbeing and competency to do something about it; and listening and learning from other’s experiences plays a significant role in this.

From seeing the emotional, it made me reflect in myself, it made me reflect more about how this is a crisis, it made me want to take the environment into more consideration every day. (Klair, March 7, 2011)

[When] I spoke from the heart there wasn’t “What can I do about it?” drawing in my own head. And [when] listening from the heart other people’s feedback I felt that I might be going through some sadness periods of that respect but their answers provided hope. I found it valuable to do that. (Elizabeth, March 10, 2011)
While it seems my original expectations for the case study Circle were met, as suggested by the feedback I received, I discovered something else in the process: a tapping into wonder. By wonder I mean the awe we experience when in nature; and when we tell nature stories we tap into that awe. As people spoke about their nature experiences it was as if their whole being lit up, and in their stories I heard expressions of delight and deep affection for the natural world. It was this phenomenon I observed in others and in myself that was most valuable for me to learn.

Tonight when I asked the case study participants to describe their first recollection of being in nature, each story I heard seemed to contain an element of wonder and amazement for the natural world. For example, I heard tall grass described as being alive! Another said, “Nature is majestic!” Somebody shared that they could never be bored in nature because every experience in it is a new one! I especially liked how one person said that what makes nature so amazing to them is that everything in it is unique, like snowflakes!

Rachel Carson (1956) writes, “What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence?” (p.88). She then replies:

Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the Earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives, their thoughts can find paths that lead to inner contentment and to renewed excitement in living. (p.88)

I found that each participant gained something valuable from recalling and sharing meaningful nature experiences.
The recalling of our memories in nature, in particular, was especially memorable for me. And not just my own, but others'; and what expressing theirs made me recall in turn. I think that affected me more than anything else, also unexpected, but perhaps that’s just because I have trouble recalling the past without something to stimulate or aid in the process, and this was ideal for that and [it] was a pleasant experience. (Lyn, March 14, 2011)

Some found it useful to be reminded about how our nature stories shape us into who we are.

I guess part of it is that it reminded me not to forget these experiences and there are important lessons that almost unconsciously form a part of you. It’s good to be reminded and to make them verbal. (Mark, March 7, 2011)

Some learned just how connected to nature we actually are and how we have this in common with each other.

It was nice to take time to talk about memories from our past and how connected we are to those memories. I found it inspiring to listen to others. It made me think about nature more and how it does have an intrinsic connection to us and our lives. It was really interesting to hear all those stories and how there is guilt or grief sometimes with, for example, trees being chopped down that people wanted to save, people getting upset about destruction happening on their own properties and how there could be joy. There was a lot of special moments with people in nature and it was nice to see them reflecting as a common thing we could share in the Circle. (Klair, March 7, 2011)

The group energy seemed to rise as people shared nature experiences. Stories led to more stories, as some remembered nature experiences similar to those shared by others in the group.

The storytelling was educating and useful, and often triggered: “Oh, yah, I’ve done that too” or “Oh, I haven’t thought of that” or “Oh, my goodness it’s been years. (Sharon, March 8, 2011)

A beautiful thing happened as people voiced and listened to meaningful experiences: individuals began to connect to themselves, to others and to nature.
It helped me remember and re-connect not only with Earth and nature, but to a part of myself... to the positive parts of my past for a start, and this I do feel is a very necessary step toward the greater being. It also connected me more to people. Listening to the others made me feel their connection too and you could hear in their voices what it meant to them as they were answering each question, especially on that last day (Lyn, March 14, 2011).

Several people discovered a new way to experience themselves in relationship to the Earth and gained context for why they care about the Earth and choose to take action to protect it.

It’s really a refreshing approach, I think that Circle is, to help humans identify themselves to nature and to realize that it’s not all about commercialism to someone...it’s about being yourself and realizing the important role of nature in your life. Many of us and all of us, already have those important experiences. (Klair, March 7, 2011)

So doing the Circle and reflecting on how I see and feel about nature, my first experiences etc., let me look at why getting involved was a natural step, why I took it upon myself to do something about a particular situation. For example, the tragedy that’s taking place in my back yard, the potential destruction of the last natural wetland of our lake, why would I take action and not others who also live here. So being able to reflect on nature and what nature meant to me was helpful in giving me context as to why becoming involved in protecting it comes so naturally. (Cynthia, March 7, 2011)

Thomashow (1995) argues that when we become more aware of our connection to nature, we understand better what drives us to be committed to environmentalism. Wheatley (2009) writes, “I have found that I can only change how I act if I stay aware of my beliefs and assumptions (p.22).

I found that speaking and listening from the heart about meaningful experience in nature and the things that matter most about the planet can empower self-awareness. Each participant identified the Circle’s capacity to generate self-awareness (in some fashion), and believe this to be the most valuable implication it
holds for EE. This in fact, was the only thing each person had in common in their feedback.

Well, I think you know a lot of this is really good for education and I think necessary because it’s connected to our own personal reason why we care about the planet or conversely why we don’t care about it. For me personally, I think it’s really good because it allows us to have that space to think of our experience of it, and the values and how nature takes care of us. What would we do without it? We can’t make it without it. We wouldn’t exist without it. So it allows us to bring up those stories within us that connect us again to that relationship we have with it. And I think having those conversations just takes it to a different level, a fuller, richer look at our relationship with it and not as something ‘out there’, there is something very, very concrete about it. Something that, when we look at things like that and relate to memories...I think it’s a good way of being educated about environmental things that happen. (Cynthia, March 7, 2011)

The work of Circle, at least the one I experienced, was for the most part a group orientated internal dialog. The value came, at least for me, not from gaining knowledge or resolve, but gaining ‘insight’ into my own and others’ deeply held convictions. Circle could be a very strong tool for a “first step” program, initiating participants in the art of listening and positive discussion. (John, April 3, 2011)

I'm not sure how it would connect with education - which usually has a fairly specific objective, expected outcomes, etc. - whereas I think of circle as being much more an explorative process, meant to help an individual peel back the layers of their experience and thoughts, and perhaps come to a better understanding or more meaningful analysis. (Sharon, March 8, 2011)

In addition to expanding self-awareness, Circle may help to expand our Earth-awareness.

I did find myself thinking about environmental action, and more of my reading (both fiction and non-fiction) had an environmental element, so perhaps the circle was affecting my choices, or perhaps I was just paying more attention to what was already there anyway. (Sharon, March 8, 2011)

Is it possible that through voicing and listening to meaningful experiences we can change the way we are being? Can Circle be a consciousness-raising tool to
change the paradigm of how we are being in this world, to one that is mutually beneficial for the Earth, humans and more-than-humans?

Earth Speak Circle could very well change the world, and I dare say it definitely would...if it were experienced by more and more people, if introduced into schooling and became a part of any healing therapy or coping mechanism/method used out there, be it for AA, abuse, childhood or marital issues, ADHD,...well absolutely any-and everything!!! To quote from the Millionth Circle: “The means through which consciousness will change”... (Lyn, March 14, 2011)

I think that if people gave Circle a chance, took the practice seriously and listen with their heart, and spoke with their heart, that they could become more empathetic about the environment that they exploit every day, and strive to make more conscientious consumer decisions to lower their carbon footprint, and even strive for a whole new outlook on living off the Earth, and consider being a pioneer in that way of life themselves. (Klair, March 7, 2011)

Baldwin (1998) writes that when we reinvent ourselves in Circle by learning how to behave differently with others we may also reinvent the way we interact with the world. It would seem that the transformation that is possible through Circle boils down to this: opportunity to voice and be listened to about the things that matter to us in a safe social space where everyone is included and treated as equals. I didn’t realize just how significant the equality piece was until after I collected feedback from my case study participants.

I think it’s just having somebody there to listen. We are not often given that opportunity. We are not often given that space where people actually sit and want to know what you are talking about, you know. I think that one of the main things Circle allowed me is to have a space to voice those things that A, number one, I don’t normally think about or think about in that context, or that story and then, secondly to have people sitting there allowing me to speak and waiting to hear it. I think it’s just having the space to be able to talk about things that I have done in space and time and having someone listen. (Cynthia, March 7, 2011)
I liked it because it was a different approach to how we usually communicate with each other. It was putting everybody on the same footing and going from there. (Mark, March 7, 2011)

This Circle allowed anyone to be heard, to become “an expert in their field”, and thus share their unique thoughts and perception about Mother Nature and the devices that plague her. Everyone’s opinion was regarded as equal in a setting like the Circle, by eliminating the need to be right and to form a leading opinion, issues about the environment could be spoken of clearly and from the heart. (Klair, March 7, 2011)

The Value of Safe Social Spaces

The case study feedback confirmed that a comfortable atmosphere supports people’s capacity to communicate with each other, and empowers people to listen more deeply within themselves and to others. Clearly, manipulating the physical environment helps to shift people into a different way of being with each other than they are use to in mundane social settings. What might have happened differently had I not chosen to manipulate the Earth Speak Circle environment? Would my case study participants have been just as comfortable by simply being in the presence of others attentively listening? It is hard to say where the physical atmosphere of Circle ends and the interpersonal atmosphere of Circle begins.

The Value of Transformative Communication

Without a doubt, the experience of meaningful speaking and respectful listening in Circle can be therapeutic and transforming. It creates a way for us to connect to our self and to others in a more substantial way, and to address our wounds and discover a sense of well-being.

What needs to be in place for communication to be transformative? Is it having the space to voice the things that matter to you or is it being listened to in a
respectful, compassionate way? Or is transformative communication a two-way street of giving and receiving information between two (or more) people? Margaret Wheatley (2009) provides an interesting take on transformative communication which she calls “bearing witness” (p. 86). She describes this as the practice of sitting bravely with another human being in their suffering, to acknowledge it for what it is and to not flee from it. I also understand bearing witness as giving testimony and providing evidence, like in a court of law in the search for truth.

Interestingly enough, one of my case study participants pointed out a clear distinction between voicing an experience versus being heard, the former being all that she could be sure of. She posed the question, “How do we really know if people are actually listening, as we can never know what others are thinking?”

I am constantly learning about Circles and listening. Just the other day I was scolded for ‘not listening’ to someone when they were speaking to me during a mundane conversation between the two of us. I learned from this experience that each person may understand ‘respectful listening’ differently. For example, my looking down to the ground to listen more deeply to what this person was saying was interpreted as ‘not listening’ and ‘rudeness’. So while there is no way to be sure that someone is actually listening, processes like Circle assure us that respectful and attentive listening is to be at the forefront of our minds as we communicate to each other. In Circle, we can have a sense that people are being mindful of the way they are listening to us because of the guidelines set in place for meaningful speaking and listening (so it doesn’t matter if we are looking at the ground or if we are holding eye contact when we listen).

I render my learning of transformative communication down to this: when we experience others in their fullness (and bear witness), we validate their experiences
as ‘real’ or ‘evident’; and when our experiences are evident to others, we in turn feel more whole.

When you breathe in my words, listening respectfully and bearing witness to who I am, life enters into me.

The Value of Community-Building

One of my favourite discoveries from the case study and the interviews was to understand Circle as a means to create a sense of community. I see now, even more so than at the onset of my research, the need people have to connect to others and to find ‘community’. Yuka Takahashi (in O’Sullivan & Taylor, 2004), writes that our connections to others and “to the rest of the universe becomes an important part of personal transformation and social transformation” (p. 177). The Earth Speak Circle demonstrated that also environmentalists sometimes need to connect with like-minded others to feel a sense of ‘wholeness’ and to be empowered about the work that they do. Takahashi also points out that “connecting with the people who are working for the same goals, sharing concerns and frustrations, but more importantly, hopes and visions, is one of the major sources of empowerment that sustain us” (p.177), in the work we do environmentally.

I don’t often have an opportunity to do that because most of what I do isn’t, sort of, sharing with a group of people who all agree with everything I think. Most often I am involved with groups of people that have different points of view and in those cases you can’t really share on an intimate level, there wouldn’t be the receptive atmosphere. So when you [have] people in a Circle that are all kind of agreeing on everything, it’s much more of a comfortable experience, it’s a comfortable place to share. (John, April 3, 2011)

It was that there were like minded individuals that actually come from the same community as me and I could actually meet them, in a Circle setting. I was perfectly surprised, in a way. (Klair, March 7, 2011)
Based on what I have discovered about Circle so far, it would seem that what is needed for communication to be transformative is also what it takes to create a sense of community: the creation of opportunities where everyone can voice what matters to them and be listened to in a safe social setting where they are treated as equals. Yet, some feel that creating a sense of community takes longer and may not take place when meeting for a first time or working together short-term like we did in the Earth Speak Circle.

I think for your course, you were not necessarily community-building. There wasn’t a community there or an intention to build a community. And I think it didn’t really come together in terms of Circle that I am familiar with. And that’s not to say that the actual two hours in Circle each time was not useful or meaningful, it’s just that it didn’t really have that sense that I think is important for Circle. The purpose of Circle is community building. (Sharon, March 8, 2011)

It is possible that the Earth Speak Circle seemed superficial because it was research-based, and this may have obscured the sense of community it might have otherwise created for some participants. Still, time is clearly a factor where community-building is concerned. Another factor might be also the knowing that there will be future opportunities to continue building upon relationships with each other.

Although I felt connected to people at the time, it was very fleeting. I didn’t expect to have [an] on-going experience with anybody beyond the Circle experience so I wondered what was the point of it? So, I just allowed the process to happen, allowed the connection to happen, but how much can you let that go? (Mark, March 7, 2011)

Also, the idea of community-building by means of transformative communication brings up an essential question to ponder: What happens when someone in a group is not interested in participating in a process of meaningful
speaking and respectful listening? I have witnessed that one person’s unwillingness to participate in such exercises affects the well-being of an entire group and stunts the group’s ability to have cohesion. Yet, true listening can not be enforced or controlled; it can only be given freely by another. If being heard is essential to create a sense of community, does the alternative of ‘not listening’ produce social exclusion?

I feel broken-hearted when people see no value in listening to others because without listening to one another, there is no community. When someone says, “I am not going to listen to you”, I hear: “You do not matter” and I often feel like a social outcast. Then I think about nature as the ultimate social outcast, and I am grieved when humans do not consider it a part of their community.

The Value of Taking Time to Nourish Relationships

It has emerged within this study that creating a sense of community involves building healthy relationships, which can take time.

I found that speaking and listening from the heart took time. It’s not something that you can blurt out quickly. I think that speaking and listening from the heart requires time, and searching for the truth. (Elizabeth, March 10, 2011)

Carl Honore (2004) in *In the Praise of Slow* writes, “All the things that bind us together and make life worth living – community, family, friendships – thrive on the one thing we never have enough of: time” (p.9). In my experience, many community organizations get caught up in what needs to get done and don’t take the time get to know who they are getting things done with. When we forget to nourish relationships within a group, cohesion deteriorates, and when this happens nothing seems to get done. Thus, taking the time to commune with each other is
important to any task at hand, so that people remain passionate and connected to what they are doing. “Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals who can go it alone” (Wheatley, 2009, p.23).

**The Value of Circle as a Way of Being**

The *Earth Speak Circle* taught me that while we don’t always have opportunity to engage with each other in such a deep meaningful way, we hunger for a way to be together, a way of being that isn’t influenced by the fast pace of western society. Even the way we speak to each other seems to be fast-paced, as we hurry through what we want to say before being interrupted, and are quick to jump in and speak as soon as the people who are doing the talking fall silent.

Today in the *Earth Speak Circle* I heard several people say that we need a way of being in this world other than how we have been. Somebody expressed that we need to learn how to 'be' that is different from our culture of productivity, having to achieve something, and having our life measured. Then somebody suggested that perhaps Circle is this way of being. Latent in people’s stories are a want to simplify life and to have more time to be in nature. Then someone said that being in Circle reminds them of how interconnected all of life is and another declared "Circle connects me to nature!" Is Circle providing a way for us to slow down and 'be' with each other? Do we reconnect to the pace of nature when we engage in Circle?
If Circle presents a different way of being, what is this way like? Clearly, it includes a sense of slowing down to be with self and others, where relationships are the focus. It seems that respectful listening is also significantly tied to this way of being. Still, there must be more.

Circles themselves have a way of being. There is something interesting that happens in Circle when a group of people come together to connect around a specific intention. There is a rising of energies between people, a creative force (‘the field’) that results that is greater than the sum of all its parts (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996). A sort of collective wisdom is found when a group of people come together, that is different for each group and every time people gather (Baldwin, 1998). It is almost as if Circles mimic nature’s ecosystems, nature’s organic systems of organization. Are Circles living systems? It would seem so at times: stories breed more stories; questions breed more questions; people come to the process as individuals and shift into a collective way of being together, etc. This has extraordinary implications for environmental education where “systems thinking”.

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31 This art piece entitled “Time is Relevant” was created November 01, 2010 to reflect on the notion of Circle teaching us time as nature experiences it.
the ability to understand the relationships between the parts of a whole, the organization of things (living or non-living), plays a significant role in environmental literacy and change (Meadows, 2008; Capra, 1996). It seems that living systems share several traits to that of Circle, for starters, they both rotate leadership! Rotating leadership in systems can be understood by the instability factor when old structures break down and new ones emerge (Meadows, 2008). Most comparable is how systems thinking and Circle are all about relationships! If learning to understand living systems has value for creating sustainable human organizations (Wheatley, 2005; Capra, 1996), could practicing Circle offer us a tangible way to embody the concept of systems thinking? Wheatley writes:

> I’ve learned that as we understand how living systems operate, we develop the skills we need: we become resilient, adaptive, aware, and creative. We enjoy working together. And life’s processes work everywhere, no matter the culture, group or person, because these are basic dynamics shared by all living beings (p.1).

Could Circle serve as a framework in EE where we can learn how to be together in a way that is more sustainable for us and the planet?

**The Value of Witnessing Emotions**

I was deeply moved by a woman at the *Way of Council I* workshop when she grabbed a knife-like talking piece and jabbed it downwards repeatedly saying, “You’re not listening to me!” to express grief over environmental degradation.

> Her emotional words cut through me like a jack hammer in cement literally shaking me open.
Knowing this experience awakened a profound emotional significance, I found myself imitating her expression in the *Earth Speak Circle* during a similar council. I found that some participants were especially moved by this emotional enactment.

I was touched by some participants who have clearly experienced some dramatic events in their life and expressed a high level of sorrow and were willing to share. The most memorable moment in circle for me was when Laura raised her voice and repeated “You’re not listening” a few times. I found it very powerful. (Mark, March 7, 2011)

Did witnessing a dramatic display of emotions help to create a safe climate to take bigger risks in the way some expressed themselves? When I was willing to take a bigger risk with showing emotion, it seemed to give a type of permission to the group to open up further. In fact, some participants opened up on a more emotional level when sharing, this was further visible by tears.

I was surprised at all of the times a tear was shed. It was moving how someone could have a special connection to the Earth like that. (Klair, March 7, 2011)

The *Earth Speak Circle* demonstrated that people connect to others and their stories when they are emotionally-charged. I have found that when one person opens up and ‘wears their heart on their sleeve’ others are more likely to follow. Emotions can propel us to look more deeply within our selves, to connect more deeply with others, and to move where we need to go (to find meaning, to make changes, to get things done, etc.). “Once our heart is engaged, it is easy to be brave”

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32 It is my belief that as a Circle facilitator I must be willing to be open and transparent; deep, reflective and personal in sharing; in as much as I hope for all participants to be.
(Wheatley 2009, p.29). If connecting to others at a deep emotional level is valuable, why don't we do this more often?

I have found that sometimes being in Circle is a lot of personal work and I can not stay present in its 'way of being' around the clock - as it requires my highest attention and focus in order to listen most attentively to myself and to others - which can leave me feeling emotionally, mentally and spiritual drained after a while. On one hand, I find it valuable to be in spaces where I can practice this heightened attention (as there is transformation and deep learning that takes place here); on the other hand, I also need spaces where I can let my mind wander and be scattered, where I am not expected to listen, and where I can 'let my hair down' in a manner of speaking. Understanding this about myself has taught me that there is a time and a space for everything including Circle - and that one way of being is not better than other ways of being - only that there are many valuable ways.
Chapter Twelve: Is Circle for Everyone?

Circle may not fit with everyone. It’s difficult to explain why this is the case, however, one interviewee expressed this in particular:

Circles by themselves are not the answer to solving environmental problems; still they can be a process to make the space for addressing conflict. They are not the ‘be all’ to everything, they are not meant to be a perfect formula as there is not such thing. And though the work of holding Circles makes a space apart for people to be their best selves, it doesn’t guarantee that. (M. Robinson, personal communication, February 2, 2011)

Sometimes the term Circle can stump people and sound like jargon. I was volunteering with a community group that reached the point of needing ‘repairs’ in the way they were functioning together. I suggested using Circle as a way to focus on relationship-building and group dynamics. Some opposed the idea, yet when another suggested ‘strategic group planning’, they jumped on that bandwagon. Are the two models comparable? I noticed the strategic planning model incorporated principles equivalent to the Circle process, for example: respect who is speaking, don’t interrupt, everyone’s input is equally valuable, be transparent, be genuine with each other, share your experiences and stories, keep issues in confidence, practice open-mindedness, etc. Can the term “Circle” be normalized into mainstream society where people can understand it and be comfortable with it? There may be ways to work around the term ‘Circle’: “Some people push back on the formal methodology of circle because it feels foreign to them. So often I simply introduce a component or two in the moment it’s needed and then afterwards tell them, ‘That’s what circle is all about‘” (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p.88).
At the *Way of Council I* workshop there was one individual who openly expressed that he didn’t see the point of that specific Circle and walked out of a council in session. This was my first encounter of someone not interested in the process after having experienced it – and it made me curious about what leads people to this stance.

Christina Baldwin (1998) tells how during a family reunion her nieces and nephew convinced her to ride on one of the world biggest roller coasters, to which she reluctantly gave in. She writes about her experience: “I learned what it feels like to be utterly taken over by terror, to be trapped in an experience that I could not get out of until it let me go...and I learned that this was too traumatic a setting for me to learn anything” (p. 174). She uses this example to explain why some people have a hard time being present in Circle (during *unbondedness* when interpersonal conflicts and tensions arise, in this case). The metaphor also provides insight into why some people may not be comfortable bearing witness to others. This also reveals that emotions significantly influence our relationship with Circle, for better and for worse.

Several *Earth Speak Circle* participants expressed a concern about bringing Circle to the masses. Those who expressed this particular concern (three in fact) were individuals whom I would identify as environmentalists, and who work as such in their professional lives. They wondered how Circle might work with people who aren’t environmentally-inclined and how they might feel if participating with people that are. They wondered if the general public can handle the emotional
depth the process can at sometimes get to, and saw this as a possible deterrent for being effective for environmental education.

I come away from the experience glad that I participated but unsure of the applicability for environmental education and communication. We were in a room with individuals that were more than likely to have similar feelings about the environment. I wonder if those with opposing views might have difficulty opening themselves up enough to consider others deep, personal views. (Mark, March 7, 2011)

What if we are just ‘singing to the choir’ or ‘preaching to the converted’ (as the environmental movement is sometimes referred to as)? I was looking to find what value this process had for those who experienced Circle, yet most of my case study participants (and interviewees), tried to identify the value it holds for mainstream society when asked the question, “Based on your experience, is Circle an effective methodology for EE?” Did the case study participants overlook the fact that the process empowered them to think reflectively and deeply about their connection to nature and their role in the environment? This observation left me asking, “What or who is educating the environmentalists or environmental educators?” Similar to the questions, “Who takes care of the caretakers?” or “Who doctors the doctors?” Thomashow (1995) writes how “environmentalists have to care for themselves, not only for the obvious reasons of self-preservation and personal growth but because they serve as role models for sustainable living” (p.161). He also advocates that environmentalists need to take care of their organizations, to avoid burnout and organizational stresses that come from being task-oriented and driven by enormous environmental crisis issues, etc. He writes:
These are parallel “healing” processes, the ability to restore an ecosystem and the personal awareness to restore one’s psyche. An overdeveloped, polluted, disturbed ecosystem is no different from an exploited, burned-out psyche. Both require the full attention of the reflective environmentalist.

(p.164)

I see environmentalists busy like bees (pollinators) working tirelessly to collect the nectar (consciousness-raising work) for the good of the hive (community). Bees that 'overdo it' make themselves vulnerable – too much pollen can weigh them down, and flying can be almost impossible. Likewise some environmentalists spend most of their time and energy community-building leaving little time and space to nourish themselves. I have heard that the bumblebee, for example, regulates its own body temperature by an internal mechanism called shivering. Is it possible the way to 'bee' is within us (self-awareness)? We all know that bees play an important role in pollinating the plants and trees that make our food, and it is the food that connects us to the circle of life. I feel that environmentalists play a similar role in connecting people to the natural world. I hear that bees are disappearing, and there is much speculation about this phenomenon they are calling Colony Collapse Syndrome (CCS). What about environmentalists, are they 'collapsing' with burn-out and what not? Perhaps Circle can 'bee' a way for environmentalists to restore themselves, in as much as they spend time restoring the environment.

Nearing the end of my research journey I came across an article entitled, “Do Environmentalists Need Shrinks?” by Michelle Nijhuis published June 22, 2011. She writes:

We don't have the processes in place for environmental educators to recognize their own emotional state. They often don't have the chance to be in a safe place with other environmentalists and talk about what’s really upsetting them. Instead we’re seeing little bits of their traumatic experience
surface in overly emotional behaviour, and in burnout – in people saying, “I just want to retire and go back to my own little garden”.

Nijhuis’s article further illuminates the need for safe spaces and processes to attend to emotions where environmental matters are concerned, and the understanding that environmentalists are as much as an area of concern to focus on as the environmental problems we see happening around us! I have come to know Circle as an exemplary safe social space and useful meaning-making process that can be applied here; and perhaps, the process can empower the personal transformation required to be more influential in environmental and social change.

Yuka Takahashi (in O’Sullivan & Taylor, 2004), writes that social transformation and the changes in the systems we strive for as environmentalists can be achieved through processes of personal transformation. “Personal transformation and social transformation are inseparable and complimentary parts of the whole...personal transformation is social transformation, and social transformation is personal transformation” (p.180).

It appears that Circle is exceptionally useful for EE; yet, this may be a matter of interpretation by the person or persons who experience the process. I learned this from an interviewee who feels Circle is not an effective methodology for EE (the only person in my study that expressed this opinion), for the very same reasons I believe it to be effective. This interviewee highlighted in particular Circle’s capacity to build relationships and empower self-awareness and personal transformation:

*My short answer is no. The Circle processes are not the end all or be all. People that are not familiar with Circle can become enamoured with them and want to apply*
them to everything and that isn’t what they are for. Circle is the process, not the outcome. If you are looking for context, like environmental protection, that needs a result, but it’s apples and oranges, because the Circle isn’t about context, it’s about the process. If you would choose the worldview of objects, as compared to the value of relationship, and understanding that relationship is the catalyst, the catalyst to change. So it is only one way to have that relationship. Being in Circle actually brings you to yourself if you allow it and in Alternative to Violence Programs we have conversations around power and there is all kinds of power where people make you do things or vice versa. But the ultimate power is that of transformative power which is the power that transforms. It’s not something you can choose, you make the space for it to happen to you, you become transformed, transformational power. And therefore Circles are a good place to open those possibilities that bring you to your self, to your own, and also your core worth. As you come to yourself and your own integrity you also become more aware, and then there are things that you can’t do anymore, like hurt the environment. (M. Robinson, personal communication, February 2, 2011)

It emerges that the value of Circle can not be understood by reading about it or hearing about it; rather, it can only be experienced. Indeed, to capture the qualitative phenomenological experience of Circle is an attempt to accomplish the impossible as we can never fully reconstruct some aspect of the world with language; and when we try to do so, what we communicate is already transformed from the original experience (Gadamer, 1976; Holliday, 2007; van Manen, 1990). It is also difficult to predict what the Circle experience will be like for everyone because there are no two Circles ever alike – which reminds me of something else I know this to be true of, nature!

It was a process, from start to finish, and left me practically unable to describe the experience to someone who wasn’t there...and those experiences - those that cannot be described - are those MOST worth having! (Lyn, March 14, 2011)
Chapter Thirteen: Recommendations for Circle Pedagogy

Besides the number of ways this paper has already explored the usefulness and value of Circle in EE, there are further recommendations that I can offer in the broader context of the educational and the environmental fields.

Circle can be used simply as a means to get to know others in a learning environment. It can be a space where people talk about who they are, why they are here, what they hoped to get out of the learning experience, etc. This is a great way to break the ice between a group of people just beginning to get to know and work with each other, and make for a more comfortable and enjoyable learning experience overall.

Even when I was teaching through University and the course was very clear to describe, the first couple of Circles had pretty much nothing to do with the course. I suspect it might be the same around environmental issues. The first issue is relationship building, how you get to know each other, what brings you here? (D. Clifton, personal communication, February 3, 2011)

As a student myself, I can appreciate the benefit of having the space in an educational setting for students to talk about frustrations, worries, and issues that go on concurrently as they pursue their studies. These spaces allow people to find a balance between head and heart so they can make better decisions overall in their school work. There is value in letting people talk about what matters most to them even if it has nothing to do with the topic being taught. The deepest learning comes after people feel they have been met (seen & heard) where they are at.

I can remember in one of my student circles we were about 8 weeks into the semester and they were just dead. So I came out and said, “Okay let’s put all this stuff aside,
what’s happening with you folks?” We had gotten to that point in our relationship. It opened up the flood gates. They needed a wellness and balance session. They needed to talk about their frustrations and their worries and the fact that graduation was coming up and all these demands were being made on them. Some of them were single moms with families to raise, holding down jobs as well as attending school. It was just amazing...and again at the end of the year, at the graduation, that process was mentioned again by students in their ‘thank-yous’ as to its importance...it was so powerful. People need that. I mean it’s one thing to think with your head all the time and I am not saying that’s not important, people need to think through stuff. But sometimes they don’t find the balance between the heart and the head. And if the heart is overriding the head, some of the crappiest decisions of the world get made because it’s all emotional. If it’s all head, you forget about the person and the heart. Circle can be an effective methodology to help begin to build relationships. For me in this business building ‘relationship’ is critical – one of my mantras in this work is no relationship no work! If you don’t start with the relationships, you ain’t going no place. (D. Clifton, personal communication, February 3, 2011)

As people get to know more about each other, naturally well-defined relationships are built, and through this relationship-building a sense of community is further established. So then, Circle is a way, a tool, a mechanism, a methodology, an approach, an avenue, etc. to create a sense of community.

Circles are not the ‘be all’ or the ‘end all.’ They are a vehicle to get to a destination. If the destination is relationship-building and creating a sense of community, Circle is a vehicle that I would choose to arrive there. Circles are not just about taking the time and creating a space to have a say and to be listened to - they are about relationships! If the destination is merely to hear what everyone feels or thinks about a certain matter - perhaps another vehicle is a better option to get there.

It is possible to utilize Circle to create a sense of community in an educational setting, be it with students, teachers, or administrators. I can only speculate that
connecting with others along the way can offer a more meaningful learning experience overall. I know it has done that for me.

The word ‘community’ is widely used, its meaning is sometimes unclear, and often disagreements occur about its proper use (Mason, 2000). Nevertheless, Berlin (1997) writes, “It’s used – in the plural – when people are talking about specific places or groups. In the singular, it’s used to indicate a quality of life: the feeling of being together with others” (p.1). It would seem that Circle fits well within this definition, and furthermore offers a broader explanation. By deeply studying Circle and coming to know it as a ‘community’ model, I have come up with simple criteria to create a sense of community: Prioritize space and time to cultivate relationships where everyone can be included and be valued as equals to voice what matters to them while everyone else listens respectfully. In point form the criterions are:

1. Make time to prioritize relationships
2. Create a comfortable and safe space to gather
3. Everyone is included
4. Everyone is valued as an equal
5. Everyone is heard

Applying these criteria in an educational setting we can ask: Have we set aside enough time and created a space where we focus on self and others? Is everybody getting a chance to speak? What can we do to ensure that everybody does? Is everyone being treated with respect? Is it understood that everyone’s
contribution is valuable and their being present is valued? Are people listening respectfully?

We might also consider Circle as an avenue to create community with nature. Thomas Berry (in O'Sullivan, 1999, p. x), writes, “If we are educating for a world that is extinguishing so many living forms then we need to rethink the deeper forces at work in our educational programs”. By applying the community-building criteria to nature, we can understand that we need to include it, to give it a voice and to listen to it, and take the time to cultivate a relationship with it. Have we set aside enough time and created a space where we can focus on the more-than-human world and let the Earth speak too?

Taking time together to create community with each other and nature can be as simple as eating together, since we all need to take time to do that too! Is it possible to host a Circle during school lunchtime or recess (see Appendix E for suggestions)? Perhaps it is not so much about the topic or questions that we ask in Circle (although it’s important to keep true to questions that allow for deep reflection), than it is about ‘experiencing’ the process for whatever reason. If this is the case, I recommend anyone who is capable to try the following:

1. Call a Circle with an intention in which you will ask deep questions relevant to the people you will invite (see Appendix F for sample questions).33

2. Create and agree upon guidelines to ensure meaningful and respectful speaking and listening takes place where everyone is treated equally and

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33 These are the majority of questions that were asked in the case study Earth Speak Circle.
heard. (You can use guidelines similar to those in this paper or come up with your own as a group, before or at your first gathering).

3. Step out of mundane social space and pace, and agree to be with each other in a more hospitable space where transformative communication as well as building healthy relationships is prioritized.

4. Trust in the process.

Pondering the application of Circle in the formal educational setting generates many more questions, as there may be certain restraints found here which may not be present in the informal sector or broader environmental field. Some of these questions include:

1. How do teachers participate as equals in Circle while at the same time maintain classroom order?

2. How might children or youth understand and exercise the principle of confidentiality at school?

3. How do we create organic spaces within time structured-environments?

David Orr (1992) defines a calling as “an inner conversation about what really matters in life and what difference one wants to make in the world” (p. 7). Bill Plotkin (2003), writes that “the gift you carry for others is not an attempt to save the world but to fully belong to it” (p.13). By researching Circle and its usefulness and value for EE, I have discovered the work that I am called to do – community-building – and have come to know Circle as a medium to cultivate my own way to participate in *The Great Work* (Berry, 1999).
Finally, my experience with Circle in EE has awoken within me a new fascination around ‘wonder and nature’. Do we experience wonder only when we begin to listen more deeply to nature? I continue to wonder!

At the start of my research, I felt drawn to Circle for its capacity to attend to the emotionalism that comes from witnessing the injustices and degradation of the natural world, in hopes to foster personal well-being and transformation. At the end of my research, I was delightfully surprised to come to know Circle for its capacity to evoke wonder.

Here I started out feeling burdened and heavy, wondering how to attend to grief and despair that myself and other environmentalists may have, and experience when working to create sustainability in a time of ecological crisis and uncertainty– and while there was this to be sure - I did not expect to find a more ‘light and fluffy’ silver-lining.

Ultimately, I learned that while on one hand, what we hear/see about the natural world can be sometimes ugly and terrible, and difficult to deal with at times; on the other hand, if we slow down long enough to really listen/see what’s around us, nature can surprise us and bring us to a place of wonder too! I found that experiencing this sense of wonder is something I needed just as much as voicing my story about what matters most to me about the planet and hearing other’s stories as well. I think it’s tapping into the sense of wonder that brought me into that more hopeful place of well-being that I was looking to discover within myself all along.
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Appendix A: Way of Council I Workshop

The Way of Council I - PATL2317

The ancient council practice of sitting in a circle - speaking and listening from the heart - can enrich any relationship at home, in school, in the workplace, in community. Dialogic council practice is widely used in public and private schools, business organizations and communities around the world.

This is a lively weekend for educators, therapists, business people, couples and others to enable you to integrate the methods of council into your personal and professional lives. Together we will explore open, heartfelt expression and attentive listening both gateways to deeper communication, as well as intercultural understanding and the non-violent exploration of conflict through the demonstration and teaching of a myriad of forms of council.

Council inspires a non-hierarchical form of deep communication that reveals both the individual as well as the group’s (field) vision and purpose. By matching an intention of open heartedness with full and authentic speaking, we move toward the possibility of true community and reclaiming a wholeness of spirit where every voice is heard.

NOTE: This program will be held at O.U.R. Ecovillage, 1565 Baldy Mountain Road, Shawnigan Lake

Facilitators: Lori Austein is an educator, lawyer, mediator, trainer and facilitator. She led councils for five years at Palms Middle School in Los Angeles and has led student rites of passage retreats and the annual council gathering at the Ojai Foundation. Lori has co-facilitated Council for Educators trainings and is a member of the Leadership Circle of the Ojai Foundation’s Center for Council Training. Devoted to increasing the use of Council, she eagerly strives to live in The Way of Council.

Hilary Leighton’s early deep and vivid experiences in wild nature rooted her belief that all teaching is an act of love and re/memorizing – this infuses her writing, teaching and learning. She is a natural educator, a perennial learner, a tireless advocate for a more sane society and a wild poet at heart! Hilary holds a MEd, studied Ecopsychology (EP) at Naropa and is entering her doctoral studies in the field. She is completing her practicum in Integrated Body Psychotherapy, is a certified Laughter Yoga Leader, a certified Myers-Briggs facilitator, a founding director of the Child Nature Alliance, and the Director of Continuing Studies at RRU. She gains inspiration from co-creating the conditions necessary for deep transformative learning and authentic connection especially in council and out on the land.

Length: 2 days
Date: Sat & Sun, Nov 6 & 7, 2010
Times: 9am - 4pm
Cost: $265 (tax exempt)
Best to Register By: Sat, Oct 23, 2010

To Register:
Register online at http://www.royalroads.ca/continuing-studies using Visa or MasterCard; or by telephone, Monday to Friday, 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. at 250-391-2600, ext. 4801; or Toll Free at 1-866-690-0220. Or, come by in person to the Continuing Studies reception area in the Grant Building, 2005 Sooke Road, Victoria, BC, Canada V9E 5Y2.

Appendix B: Council of all Beings in MAEEC

The following is a poster I created to call Royal Roads Masters of Arts in Environmental Education and Communication (MAEEC) students, teachers, and administrators to a Circle, during the summer residency in 2010.

A Call to Council for all MAEEC Cohorts!
Designed by Joanna Macy, the Council of All Beings borrows from the ancient practice of sitting in circle while reconnecting with the natural world through exploration and authenticity.

Council of all Beings Circle

**Purpose:** A communal ritual that allows us to step outside from our human identity and speak on behalf on other life-forms. It is excellent for growing the ecological self, for it brings our sense of solidarity with life and fresh appreciation for the damage wrought by the human species.

**Council Can:**
- Enrich relationships at home, school, at the workplace, in community
- Be used in schools, organizations and communities
- Enables us to integrate open, heartfelt expression and attentive listening into our communication practices
- Be a non-violent exploration of conflict
- Inspire a non-hierarchical form of deep communication
- Move toward the possibility of true community

**Wednesday Night**
**August 11, 2010**
**6:00pm**
*Meet at the Mews*

**What You Need to Know...**

* Bring yourself.
* Meeting at 6:00pm at the Mews (Council of Circle is ~2hrs in length).
* If you eat dinner in Habitat Café, you may want to consider eating before the circle.

Circle Facilitators
Hillary Leighton
Laura Cameron
Appendix C: Tale of the Stream

The following Sufi story was used for an exercise in my case study Circle, retrieved from: http://www.dailygood.org/pdf/ij.php?tid=498

The Tale of the Stream

Once upon a time, there was a frigid mountain stream. As it descended the mountain, it loved to play, tumbling down waterfalls, speeding through rapids, ambling through meadows, and resting in cold mountain lakes, but as it descended it gradually forgot where it had come from.

Time passed, and one day it found itself at the foot of the mountain, and before it lay a vast expanse of desert. It had never seen a desert before and was a bit intimidated, but it carried on as before and hurtled itself against the sand. It did not travel far before it realized that it was surely disappearing into the sand. It was, however, convinced that its destiny was to cross the desert. Just then, it heard a soft voice from the Sands beneath it. “The wind travels across the desert, and so can you.”

“Yes, but the Wind can fly, I have no wings,” replied the Stream.

“Rise up and let the Wind carry you,” said the Sands.

“But how is that possible?” asked the Stream.

“By allowing yourself to be absorbed by the Wind,” replied the Sands.

“That doesn’t sound like a good idea,” said the Stream. “After all, I’m a Stream used to wandering over the land like a snake, and snakes don’t fly either, and besides how can I be sure that I’ll become a stream again? Can’t I just stay as I am?”

“That is not possible,” said the Sands, “You will either disappear or become a quagmire. You must trust in the wind. It will carry you over the desert to the mountains where you will fall as rain and become a stream once again.”

On hearing these words the Stream had a dim recollection of once being held in the arms of the Wind. It then realized that this was the necessary, not the obvious thing to do. So the Stream raised its vapor into the welcoming arms of the wind and was gently carried along over the desert and high up into the roof of a mountain many, many miles away.

The Stream was learning, but the Sands had seen it day after day because they extend all the way from the bed of the Stream to the foot of the mountains. It is due to this knowledge that it is said that the journey of the Stream of Life is written in the Sands.
Appendix D: Earth Speak Circle Participant Profiles

Here with permission are the full character profiles created to summarize the lived experience of Circle for each of my case study participants. Each participant is identified with their real first name with permission.

Mark’s Circle Experience

Mark (age 52) was interested in the Earth Speak Circle because he is curious about the viability of different, creative approaches to environmental education. Mark works with community interests on environmental protection, restoration, awareness and education projects, mostly focused on salmon, as a local Department of Fisheries Community Advisor. Mark came to the project with no prior background or experience of Circle.

When asked to describe his Circle experience, Mark commented on the comfortable atmosphere in which it took place and how it encouraged him to be open and share with the others present. He enjoyed speaking about his meaningful experiences and felt that he had benefited from the activity. Mark described the value in voicing his experiences: I guess part of it is that it reminded me not to forget these experiences and there are important lessons that almost unconsciously form a part of you. It’s good to be reminded and to make them verbal.

Mark described the Circle as enlightening. This means that it was a new and different learning experience for him, unlike any he had experienced. Mark articulated: I liked it because it was a different approach to how we usually communicate with each other. It was putting everybody on the same footing and going from there. I liked it because these are issues I care about and like to talk about. But typically we don’t get to do this with our friends, because it’s too sensitive, too core, you know. So for me ‘enlightening’ was a different experience than I am use to and I appreciated talking about things I care about.

The most meaningful part about Circle for Mark was listening to others. He was interested to hear other’s experiences and what had meaning for them. He especially enjoyed when people shared through stories as he related to some and the stories triggered some of his own. The most powerful moments of Circle for Mark happened when people openly expressed themselves with strong emotions. He writes about one such moment: I was touched by some participants who have clearly experienced some dramatic events in their life and expressed a high level of sorrow and were willing to share. The most memorable moment in circle for me was when Laura raised her voice and repeated “You’re not listening” a few times. I found it very powerful.

Mark expressed a great deal of concern as to the purpose of Circle and ambiguity about its applicability in the larger context. He expressed that perhaps he wasn’t able to comprehend the Circle’s purpose (to speak and listen from the heart about meaningful experiences), because he tends to be task, linear and analytically oriented, and the case study wasn’t about solving something or getting something done. Mark explains: It seemed a little strange at times to just be listening and speaking of experiences in nature when there was no issue to be resolved. Most of the time, in my work life, discussions are held to solve a problem, reach a logical agreement and develop actions.

Mark was at odds with the Circle’s lack of problem-solving and community-building. He questioned the point of putting effort into forming relationships with those present when the group would have nothing to do with each other beyond the research project. In light of this, he felt a bit disconnected at times to what was taking place and when he did feel connected it was fleeting. He expressed: Although I felt connected to people at the time. It was very fleeting. I didn’t expect to have [an] on-going experience with anybody beyond the Circle experience so I wondered what was the point of it? So I just allowed the process to happen, allowed the connection to happen, but how much can you let that go?

He felt some of the disconnection had to do with some questions asked in the Circle, in particular the questions about childhood experiences in nature. Mark found these questions difficult to relate to because he feels a distancing from his childhood memories as he ages. He did, however, feel that the process of remembering meaningful experiences of nature was beneficial.
Mark’s main concern about Circle is how do we bring it to the masses and use it in an effective way with people who do not have environmental values or are close-minded to environmental matters. He expressed: I come away from the experience glad that I participated but unsure of the applicability for environmental education and communication. We were in a room with individuals that were more than likely to have similar feelings about the environment. I wonder if those with opposing views might have difficulty opening themselves up enough to consider others deep, personal views. So, does that exclude those with opposing views from the process? It was also difficult to consider the value when the group appeared to not have a specific objective or task. As mentioned earlier, I’m just not used to operating in that kind of environment.

When asked to consider what value Circle might have for those who do experience it (never mind those that don’t), Mark suggested that the process could be useful to empower people to understand their views of the world, and through their sharing of meaningful experiences they may gain more conviction of their values and worldviews. Mark suggests that this self-discovery process is essential to foster environmental values and action.

Elizabeth’s Circle Experience

Elizabeth (age 62) participated in the Earth Speak Circle to learn about the Circle process and to engage with others in environmental thinking and doing. Elizabeth is a concerned community member who volunteers with a local environmental organization. She came to the project with no prior background or experience of Circle.

When asked to describe her Circle experience Elizabeth commented on how much she enjoyed it and how it provided her with a new way of looking within, a new way to share her ideas and feelings, and a new way to deal with environmental matters. Elizabeth expressed: I found that I really enjoyed it. It made me feel in a different way, how to resolve things, or how to share my ideas and feelings, and to go inside myself to really search for the truth that I felt.

Elizabeth found that the process encouraged a ‘slowing down’ of time which she believes is necessary to take a real good look inwards in order to speak truth from the heart. Elizabeth also feels this slowing down of time helps to deepen a respect for others and nature, because when we take the time to reflect on and share our experiences and attentively listen to others, this is practicing respect. She expressed: I found that speaking and listening from the heart took time. It’s not something that you can blurt out quickly. I think that speaking and listening from the heart requires time, and searching for the truth.

Elizabeth talked about the value in voicing her experiences and the significance of equality for resolving environmental issues. According to Elizabeth, by simply talking about the things that matter to us in Circle we engage in a way to deal with problems and issues. She calls this a process of ‘getting it out of your system’ sort to speak. Next, Elizabeth believes the quality of being equal to others in Circle is helpful for people to share their experiences. When we share how we feel and what we do, even if it’s as simple as growing a garden, Elizabeth believes Circle can help us to better manage our frustrations and negative perceptions about planetary issues. She also feels everyone needs to be given the floor to speak if we are going to resolve environmental matters.

Elizabeth expressed that when we speak openly from our hearts in a space as equals, there is a creative energy that is empowered among individuals and within the group. She feels that this creativity is important for creating a sustainable environment. Elizabeth shared: We need to take away those screens, those locks that prohibit people from being creative, really. When dealing with change, people need to come up with more creativity about how to resolve things. It doesn’t have to be a one-sided, like from the government, the corporations or the people. Everybody’s trying to ask everybody to listen, “this is why we are doing this” and everybody has their sides. People feel inferior to the big corporations that are exercising power, really. So I feel that in a circle you can not only open up and be honest and be truthful but I think people can come up with creative ideas to actually resolve things.

Finally, Elizabeth expressed that listening to peoples’ stories in Circle empowered hope within her. She explained that people’s stories helped her to feel that she was not alone in her environmental thinking and doing, that negative environmental experiences are not the end of the world, and there is insight and encouragement to be found. Elizabeth shared: [When I spoke from the heart there wasn’t “What can I do about it?” drawing in my own head. And [when] listening from the heart other people’s feedback I felt that I might be going through some sadness periods of that respect but their answers provided hope. I found it valuable to do
Cynthia’s Circle Experience

Cynthia (age 53) is an experienced Circle facilitator and active environmentalist. She studied Circle through a Community Facilitator volunteer training program (with Mission Restorative Justice) and through a Wellness Counsellor program at Rhodes College in Vancouver. Cynthia chose to participate in the Earth Speak Circle because she was interested to see how Circle might be utilized to discuss environmental matters which is relevant to the work she does directing a local environmental stewardship non-profit society. Cynthia also saw the project as an opportunity to enjoy a different experience of Circle altogether.

When asked to describe her experience of Circle, Cynthia first commented on the Circle atmosphere and how it made her feel comfortable to share, even though she was engaging with strangers. As the Circle progressed, she felt moved and inspired by the others present and enjoyed listening to them. Cynthia later felt a strong sense of connection to the others and described a tremendous joy as she listened to their stories.

The Circle engaged Cynthia to experience nature in a whole new way. She explained how she never really thought about or reflected on nature or her relationship with the natural world. Through the process of self reflection the Circle provided, Cynthia felt she gained context for why she is the way she is, why she is so strongly drawn to nature and why she gets involved with environmental matters where resolution and change is needed. Cynthia shared: It was a natural thing for me to get involved when I saw something that needed changing or solving. I took it upon myself to help do something about it. I never really asked the question “why am I doing this”. So doing the Circle and reflecting on how I see and feel about nature, my first experiences etc., let me look at why getting involved was a natural step, why I took it upon myself to do something about a particular situation. For example, the tragedy that’s taking place in my back yard, the potential destruction of the last natural wetland of our lake, why would I take action and not others who also live here. So being able to reflect on nature and what nature meant to me was helpful in giving me context as to why becoming involved in protecting it comes so naturally.

Cynthia felt that having the space to voice what mattered to her about the natural world and to be listened to was meaningful. She expressed: I think it’s just having somebody there to listen. We are not often given that opportunity. We are not often given that space where people actually sit and want to know what you are talking about, you know. I think that one of the main things Circle allowed me is to have a space to voice those things that A, number one, I don’t normally think about or think about in that context, or that story and then secondly to have people sitting there allowing me to speak and waiting to hear it. I think it’s just having the space to be able to talk about things that I have done in space and time and having someone listen.

The voicing of meaningful experiences in Circle was valuable to Cynthia. The process reminded her of her connection to nature and her love of the natural world, it renewed her relationship with the Earth in a matter of speaking and, empowered her to become more self-aware overall.

Cynthia says she is a true believer in the magic of Circle. To her, the magic is the process of people coming together and the moments that happen when people really listen to each other. It is also how people’s hearts begin to soften and they begin to pay attention to each other as they hear each other’s stories, even when there is conflict present.

Cynthia feels strongly that Circle could be an effective methodology for environmental education. She believes that having the opportunity to deeply reflect on nature and our experiences of it allows us to see the value and necessity of the natural world, and how we are interconnected to it. Cynthia believes Circle is useful for empowering people to explore their relationship to nature, why they care and conversely, why some people don’t care; which to her is important to enable people towards positive environmental action. Cynthia shared: Well, I think you know a lot of this is really good for education and I think necessary because it’s connected to our own personal reason why we care about the planet or conversely why we don’t care about it. For me personally, I think it’s really good because it allows us to have that space to think of our experience of it, and the values and how nature takes care of us. What would we do with out it? We can’t make it without it. We wouldn’t exist without it. So it allows us to bring up those stories within us that connect us again to that relationship we have with it. And I think having those conversations just takes it to a different level, a fuller, richer look at our relationship with it and not as something ‘out there’, there is something very, very concrete about it. Something
that, when we look at things like that and relate to memories...I think it's a good way of being educated about environmental things that happen.

**Klair's Circle Experience**

Klair (age 20) joined the *Earth Speak Circle* project because she was interested in learning about Circle and how it might be a useful communications tool to enlighten people’s perceptions about environmental topics. Klair is a university student who is passionate about living environmentally sustainable and she engages in environmental projects through her school, work and volunteer opportunities. Klair came to the project with no prior background or experience of Circle.

When asked to describe her experience, Klair first described how the calm, comfortable atmosphere of Circle helped her to be silent and to listen more deeply to others and to her own inner dialogue. Klair called the Circle experience enlightening which to her means it was a learning opportunity. This opportunity included meeting like-minded people who live in her community. She expressed: it was that there were like-minded individuals that actually came from the same community as me and I could actually meet them in a Circle setting. I was perfectly surprised in a way.

Klair enjoyed listening to people tell their stories and found this experience valuable in the way she could connect to her self, to others and to the Earth. Klair shared: it was nice to take time to talk about memories from our past and how connected we are to those memories. I found it inspiring to listen to others. It made me think about nature more and how it does have an intrinsic connection to us and our lives. It was really interesting to hear all those stories and how there is guilt or grief sometimes with, for example, trees being chopped down that people wanted to save, people getting upset about destruction happening on their own properties and how there could be joy. There was a lot of special moments with people in nature and it was nice to see them reflecting as a common thing we could share in the Circle.

Klair found that the Circle helped her to connect to nature and it reminded her of the important role the natural world plays in her life and everyone else’s. Klair feels that recalling meaningful experiences of nature is beneficial for most people. She expressed: it's really a refreshing approach, I think, that Circle is, to help humans identify themselves to nature and to realize that it's not all about commercialism to someone... it's about being yourself and realizing the important role of nature in your life. Many of us, and all of us, already have those important experiences.

Klair felt that everyone was heard in the Circle and she was moved by the emotional depth at which sometimes people shared. Klair also found that the Circle’s practice of equality supported everyone’s capacity to openly voice their experiences. Klair articulated: I was surprised at all of the times a tear was shed. It was moving how someone could have a special connection to the Earth like that. This Circle allowed anyone to be heard, to become ‘an expert in their field’, and thus share their unique thoughts and perception about Mother Nature and the devices that plague her. Everyone’s opinion was regarded as equal in a setting like the Circle, by eliminating the need to be right and to form a leading opinion, issues about the environment could be spoken of clearly and from the heart.

The aspect of Circle that had the most profound effect on Klair was witnessing other’s emotions. From this experience, she found herself more motivated to be environmentally active and empowered to reflect more deeply about her relationship with the natural world. Klair feels that the experience of observing others (stories and emotions), could make Circle an effective methodology for environmental education and communication. Klair expressed: From seeing the emotional, it made me reflect in myself, it made me reflect more about how this is a crisis, it made me want to take the environment into more consideration every day. Being an observer in Circle was effective for me. Being an observer in Circle you become more aware of the environment. So I think that’s a good tool that Circle offers people, to witness other people’s emotions and also the discussion part.

On the other hand, Klair pointed out that the emotional experience of Circle may not be for everybody. She expressed concern and ambiguity to the effectiveness of Circle in the larger context and fears that it may be difficult to convince the general public to engage in Circle about meaningful topics. However, she feels that if people were to engage in Circle, it could foster empathy within them and empower a positive behaviour change towards creating a healthier environment. Klair expressed: I think that if people gave Circle a chance, took the practice seriously and listen with their heart, and spoke with their heart, that they could become
more empathetic about the environment that they exploit every day, and strive to make more conscientious consumer decisions to lower their carbon footprint, and even strive for a whole new outlook on living off the Earth, and consider being a pioneer in that way of life themselves.

Sharon’s Circle Experience

Sharon (age 65) was interested in the Earth Speak Circle to meet and interact with different people and to look at alternate ways of understanding Circle in the context of education. Sharon is an active volunteer with several environmental and other non-governmental organizations in her community. She has an extensive background of participating in and facilitating Circle over the years for a variety of purposes.

Sharon felt that the Circle atmosphere (created with the lights, blankets, pillows, etc.), was welcoming and comfortable. She enjoyed that the group included both men and women, and a range women’s ages as she felt that the young women brought a new perspective to the group to learn from.

Sharon found that the research aspect of the project gave the Circle a superficial essence. She found that the Circle lacked a community feel and did not have the same impact as most Circles she has been a part of. In Sharon’s opinion, a Circle should be about building community, where people gather for a shared purpose or to resolve something, and so there is a deeper sense of relationship-building going on. Sharon expressed: I think for your course, you were not necessarily community-building. There wasn’t a community there or an intention to build a community. And I think it didn’t really come together in terms of Circle that I am familiar with. And that’s not to say that the actual two hours in Circle each time was not useful or meaningful, it’s just that it didn’t really have that sense that I think is important for Circle. The purpose of Circle is community building.

Sharon enjoyed the storytelling that took place in Circle and found that often what others shared triggered her own memories and things she hadn’t thought about in a long time. At some point, Sharon wondered if her Circle experience was having an influence on her day to day reading choices. Sharon explained: I did find myself thinking about environmental action, and more of my reading (both fiction and non-fiction) had an environmental element, so perhaps the circle was affecting my choices, or perhaps I was just paying more attention to what was already there anyway.

Sharon made a clear distinction between having meaningful experiences and talking about them. Sharon felt that talking about meaningful experiences was not as meaningful as the original experience, although the storytelling aspect did have value. Sharon explains: To me storytelling and meaningful experiences are two slightly different places around Circle. The storytelling was educating and useful, and often triggered: “Oh, yah, I’ve done that too” or “Oh, I haven’t thought of that” or “Oh, my goodness it’s been years”. It opens that other memory but more in terms of the oral history, for example, than rather than when it is Circle sharing time, for example. So talking about meaningful experience was not very meaningful for me. Having the experience and being there and not being able to talk is what makes it special.

Sharon is uncertain how Circle could be utilized in an educational setting, as she feels education tends to be objective or goal-oriented. Still, Sharon can imagine Circle being useful as a self-explorative process. Sharon writes: I’m not sure how it would connect with education – which usually has a fairly specific objective, expected outcomes, etc. – whereas I think of circle as being much more an explorative process, meant to help an individual peel back the layers of their experience and thoughts, and perhaps come to a better understanding or more meaningful analysis.

Sharon feels that Circle might be useful for communication purposes in the context of building community or enhancing an experience-based educational purpose. She suggests this learning experience would most likely be about self and relationships. She writes: It could be useful for communication purposes, specifically in the context of building community, but I think it would need to be much more of a shared-leadership model, and would work best where people have some common purpose or intent – it could be a process that would enhance the “doing it” action-orientation of most environmental groups. Learning would certainly occur, but it would likely be more about self and relationship, which is where I think the process of Circle is most effective.

And later Sharon shared: Although if it were an outside...if we were at a summer camp with a group of people...and I still do summer camp, first nations on the land kind of experiences, and I take my grandchildren
every year. If it was done in a way, so that there was an experience with educational content and then the way of looking at it or talking about it can be done in Circle. That could work.

John’s Circle Experience

John (age 54) joined the *Earth Speak Circle* project because of his interest in exploring new and thoughtful ways to connect and communicate with others in order to create a more sustainable society. John is an active environmentalist who works with numerous organizations, political leaders, groups and individuals involved in environmental projects all over the Fraser Valley. John came to the project with no prior background or experience of Circle.

John expected to find a variety of people at the *Earth Speak Circle* including anti-environmentalist, policy-makers and others which he felt would have created a more enjoyable experience for him in Circle. He was disappointment that the project did not present an opportunity to hear different points of views, nor present an opportunity to resolve an environmental issue. John was later surprised to get something valuable from the experience. He expressed: I had expectation that was probably unrealistic, I thought, I might be able to engage with all these other people, some of them perhaps, anti-environment, some pro, some neutral, some policy-makers. And I had these expectation and when I showed up that evening and looked around I thought, “This is a group of people just like me, we are just going to have this group hug and go home”. So originally, I was very disappointed. Then I thought, “I’ll just let this go and try to contribute” and as the sessions proceeded I discovered at least in this application, I don’t know if that’s how all Circles work, at least in this format Circle was more an inner dialogue than an outer one. Most people were there to share their inner thoughts and concerns and having a space to do that. It’s good for me to do that too, I didn’t realize how much I needed to do that until the end of the Circle experience and I thought, “Wow, this is therapy” and that’s terrific.

John brought up the therapeutic quality of Circle several times. John felt that the therapeutic essence of Circle most likely came from the opportunity to voice his experiences in a group of like-minded individual where he felt heard and accepted. John described everyone present in the Circle as being “on the same wave length” which he felt made for the comfortable environment in which to speak and to be listened to. John shared: I don’t often have an opportunity to do that because most of what I do isn’t, sort of, sharing with a group of people who all agree with everything I think. Most often I am involved with groups of people that have different points of view and in those cases you can’t really share on an intimate level, there wouldn’t be the receptive atmosphere. So when you [have] people in a Circle that are all kind of agreeing on everything, it’s much more of a comfortable experience, it’s a comfortable place to share.

John expressed how sharing inner thoughts and feelings can make people vulnerable, but perhaps vulnerability is needed to foster environmental values and action. In the last Circle session John shared with the group: To show vulnerability is certainly not considered a virtue when you are trying to defend the environment, when you are trying to promote environmental awareness, but it should be. I think vulnerability is essential because you are sharing the whole idea of what’s most important in the natural environment and that is it’s vulnerability and we are a part of it whether we like it or not. We are a part of it. We are the environment and vulnerability is an essential part of that because vulnerability implies connectedness and dependence on each other, and I think you can get that in Circle better than probably than any format that I’ve experienced vulnerability.

John later addressed that we really don’t have the opportunity to show vulnerability when dealing with larger environmental issues (that extend beyond our personal issues), or in a more public social setting; and that in fact, it may be more useful to use different approaches to deal with the bigger public issues including intellectual and virtual approaches. Along with this, John felt he could not judge the effectiveness of Circle in the larger context, including environmental education and communication, unless he was given the opportunity to explore how Circle might function in a climate of conflict or debate, or where a group individuals has diverse opinions and views (as this is the setting in which John’s environmental work mostly takes place). Still, John felt that the Circle experience empowered him to be more self-reflective and he pointed out that Circle may hold potential for empowering people to become more self-aware; which could very well be the first step to then engage people in effective environmental discussion. John shared: The work of Circle, at least the one I experienced, was for the most part a group orientated internal dialog. The value came, at least for me, not from gaining knowledge or resolve, but gaining ‘insight’ into my own and others’ deeply held
convictions. Circle could be a very strong tool for a “first step” program, initiating participants in the art of listening and positive discussion.

Lyn’s Circle Experience

Lyn (age 36) came to the Earth Speak Circle interested in the opportunity to explore environmental thinking, feeling and doing in a Circle process. Lyn is deeply passionate about the Earth and concerned for its well-being. She came to the project with some experience participating in Circle.

Lyn found that the Circle’s atmosphere and attention to detail created a calm space where one could have focus as well as exercise respect for others. On one hand she wondered if enough time was given to engage in meaningful storytelling, and on the other hand, felt enough time was given to skim the surface of matters without getting lost in an emotional depth that can occur when speaking about such experiences. Nonetheless, Lyn feels strongly that emotions are an important factor in our capacity to connect with others and to what’s taking place in the world around us.

Lyn appreciated hearing people’s stories in Circle and found that they triggered memories of her own meaningful experiences in nature; and through recalling those parts of her youth she got to “meet her past again” in a manner of speaking. The process of recalling these memories was the most meaningful part of Circle for her. Lyn shared: The recalling of our memories in nature, in particular, was especially memorable for me. And not just my own, but others’, and what expressing theirs made me recall in turn. I think that affected me more than anything else, also unexpected, but perhaps that’s just because I have trouble recalling the past without something to stimulate or aid in the process, and this was ideal for that and was a pleasant experience.

Lyn experienced the Circle as a process of self-awareness, where she became more aware of her past experiences of nature, her connection to the Earth, what it means to her, and how it continues to move her. She felt that the storytelling aspect of Circle was particularly useful for connecting with people, and for connecting with nature in the larger context. Lyn expressed: It helped me remember and re-connect not only with Earth and nature, but to a part of myself, to the positive parts of my past for a start, and this I do feel is a very necessary step toward the greater being. It also connected me more to people, listening to the others made me feel their connection too and you could hear in their voices what it meant to them as they were answering each question, especially on that last day.

Lyn feels that the structure of listening in Circle helped her to feel heard. She articulated: The structure of listening really helped to feel heard. In some ways [this] was profound, especially when we were asked in the end to say what it meant to us to feel heard... it made us think what it really did mean, and made us realize it. I don’t think I was really aware of how much it meant to me, how much it had really affected me, how much it had done/was doing for me, until we were asked to put it into words that last day. Later on, Lyn posed the question: How do we really know if we have been heard, as we never know what others are thinking? She pointed out the clear distinction between voicing an experience versus being heard, the former being all that she can be sure of.

Based on her experience, Lyn feels that Circle is an effective methodology for EE. She sees Circle as a tool for raising consciousness and feels that it could be effective for healing and therapeutic purposes that most people can benefit from. Lyn articulated: Earth Speak Circle could very well change the world, and I dare say it definitely would...if it were experienced by more and more people, if introduced into schooling and became a part of any healing therapy or coping mechanism/method used out there, be it for AA, abuse, childhood or marital issues, ADHD....well absolutely anything!!! To quote from the Millionth Circle: “The means through which consciousness will change”.

Lyn sees Circle as a prospective space where the masses can have their say, and not just the elite few. She feels that Circle creates a space where everyone can be heard, and where community-building can take place to connect people to like-minded others; moreover, she feels that connecting to others or creating collective consciousness is important to deal with environmental matters. Finally, Lyn expressed that it’s difficult to describe the experience of Circle and feels people need to experience it for themselves. Lyn shared: It was a process, from start to finish, and left me practically unable to describe the experience to someone who wasn’t there...and those experiences – those that cannot be described – are those MOST worth having!
Appendix E: How to Create a Listening Circle: A Simple Guide for Students

How to Create a Listening Circle: A Simple Guide for Students
Created by Laura Cameron © 2011

The following is an activity to empower students to engage with each other through meaningful speaking and respectful listening around the things that matter most to them about the planet. This is an activity where everyone gets to be included and everyone is equal. It may be ideal to host your Circle at lunch time, as everybody needs to take time to eat lunch, and so why not eat lunch together while you talk about meaningful things?

Step One: Set the Intention
Before you call a Circle, you will need to know what you are calling it for. This is called setting the intention. What do you intend to do in your Circle? What will you talk about? For example, you could talk about why food matters. When you figure out your intention, you are ready to call a Circle.

Step Two: Call the Circle
It takes someone to call a Circle. The caller sets a time and place and asks the others to attend. Who will you invite? The entire class? Is the teacher invited too? Is another class invited? Is it just the girls or just the boys? Or both? Are you inviting students from other classes too? Even though you may invite many people, only some will choose to participate – and that’s okay. Whoever is meant to be at your Circle will come – don’t feel blue if someone you really hoped would join the group won’t come, maybe they will next time, who knows? It should always be a matter of free choice whether to participate or not.

Make sure to find a place where you won’t be disturbed by others not participating.
Check with your teacher/principal about hosting a Circle. You might be able to get out of class five minutes earlier or be five minutes late if you go over time. It doesn’t hurt to ask. No matter what, it’s good to have permission wherever and whenever you decide to host your Circle, so that others know what you are up to and they can be respectful of your group and what you are doing. Finally, and most importantly, let the people you call to Circle know what they are being called for (the intention of the Circle). For example, if you are talking about the problem of school lunch litter, the intention might be, “Come gather in Circle to talk about school lunch litter and together find ways to prevent and reduce it!”

Step Three: Make Agreements
You will need to write up a set of agreements as to how you will engage with each other – this is so everyone gets along with each other as best as possible. Make sure everyone who is participating in
your Circle knows what the agreements are and are okay with them before you engage in the process. You can hand the agreements out ahead of time, or introduce and talk about them when everyone is gathered, or make them up on the spot at the start of your Circle. Here are some simple ones you can use:

- Everyone gets a turn to speak.
- The person who is holding the talking stick is the one doing the talking.
- Those without the talking piece have to sit and listen quietly and respectfully.
- No interrupting the person talking.
- Pass the stick when you are finished sharing.
- Don’t hog the talking piece – make sure there is time for everyone to have a say.
- When you share, share something that is from your own experience or story.

(Circle is not the space to talk about others, point fingers, get upset at others, etc. It is a space to share from your heart about what really matters to you!)

Can you think anything missing from this list? What agreements would you or your group add? What are some other ways your group can practice respect for each other while communicating? When your group has agreed upon set agreements, they may be simple enough to memorize, or you may want to jot them down, or maybe even write them on a poster board you can bring to future Circles.

**Step Three: Sit in a Circle**

Sitting in Circle doesn’t mean that you are ‘in’ Circle. We just sit in Circle so that we can see ‘who’ is doing the talking. Make sure you’re comfortable, so sitting still to listen is easier.

**Step Four: The Talking Piece**

Find something that you can use as a talking piece – this can be an object special to your class or group. The piece can complement what you are talking about, for example, if you are talking about health and food you could use an apple. Rocks and sticks and other things that you can collect from nature also make really good talking pieces. You can have one talking piece to pass around to everyone or you can have many (when the talking piece is passed to you, you can switch to a piece you’d rather hold). You can also ask your group members to bring their own talking piece to put in the center of the group.

**Step Five: Opening the Circle Space**

You will need to separate your normal school social space from the Circle space. This can be done simply by verbalizing, “I am now opening the Circle” (and then you can state the intention as to why you are opening the Circle, so people can remember – especially if your Circle is taking place days/weeks after you sent out your invites). You could also read a poem, sing a song, or use an instrument like a bell to open your Circle. You open Circle because you want to get everyone’s
attention that you are now going to behave differently with each other, where people speak and listen respectfully with one another. When you open the Circle it means that everyone now needs to follow the agreements, which includes everyone now being silent and listening to the one holding the talking piece (which starts with the person ‘opening’ the Circle).

**Step Six: Ask Deep Questions**
Now you are pretty much ready to engage in meaningful communication with each other – one last thing is needed: a really good question that each person gets to answer and reflect on. You might only have time for one question (especially if it’s a really good one which evokes people’s stories), or you may have time for more. You can include the question in your invite as well, so everyone knows exactly what they will be talking about – or it can be a surprise, as it will already have something to do with the intention of your Circle, right? A good question is one that everyone can answer. Good questions also make you think and dig deep. For example:
- Describe your favourite memory of being in nature.
- What is the thing you love the most about the planet Earth?
- Describe an experience when you were in the wild, met a wild animal, etc.
- What’s in your lunch that grows in a garden? Tell its story. (Start from it being a seed planted and on).

**Step Seven: Closing the Circle Space**
After each person has had an opportunity to speak, and it’s time to leave the Circle - it’s important to close the space, similar to how you opened it. This just helps people understand that they can go back to behaving and socializing like they normally do. You can close the Circle verbally simply by saying, “I now close this Circle. Thank-you for sharing” or you can use an instrument, or close with a favourite poem, etc. It’s up to you! Also, Circles are always done in the spirit of generosity and joy – so thanking everyone for participating is also a great way to close the Circle.

**Following Up:** Are you curious what people got out of your Circle? What did they like best? Were they comfortable talking? Did they feel respected while they shared? Did they like the questions? What else might they like to talk about in Circle? Talk about your Circle, there may be things that you can or will change for next time so that everyone really enjoys what is taking place, gets along with the others, and maybe even becomes better friends. Possibly you may have come up with some creative ideas to solve some issues in your school, neighbourhood, etc. and are ready to put what you talked about to action. You may want to do the action, and then meet in Circle again to talk about what you accomplished. There are infinite possibilities for Circle – you only have to imagine one!
Appendix F: *Earth Speak Circle* Questions

The following questions were carefully crafted and applied in the case study Circle for research purposes:

1. Describe your first recollection of being in nature.

2. What is it that you love about the planet Earth?

3. What contribution do you bring to this world, a special gift that you have that no one else can give, that dies when you die?

4. Are you happy with your relationship with the natural environment? Why or why not?

5. How do you feel about the future state of the planet? Is your outlook hopeful or despairing?

6. Describe an experience that you had in nature that will stay in your memory forever.

7. Share a memory or story about an experience in the wilderness, or wild space, or with a wild being.

8. Think of someone with whom you find it difficult to share your concerns and what matters most about the environment with. In talking with them about the Earth, the environment, what would you like them to know?

9. How do you now, at this point in your lifetime, understand how you contribute to the healing of the planet Earth?

10. Share a story of an experience you had in nature that will stay in your memory forever.

11. Share what it has meant to you to speak and be listened to from the heart in Circle about meaningful experience of nature and the things that matter to you most about the planet.

12. What do you take away with you from this Circle?