

OPENING A CIRCLE, OPENING OURSELVES

ALL FELLOWS PROGRAMMING: CONVENING GUIDE & HANDBOOK

"In the beginning was the relationship.
... Only when we stand in direct
relation to the world—in a living,
spiritual relation—do we truly exist."

MARTIN BUBER

2025 edition

"ANYTIME IS A GOOD TIME TO PULL UP CHAIRS AND OPEN A CIRCLE."
LIAM HOOPER



All Fellows Gatherings Rationale and Circle-Way Convening Guide

2025 – LIAM HOOPER, MDIV



1 Introduction

PAGE 02



2 Opening A Circle

PAGE 03

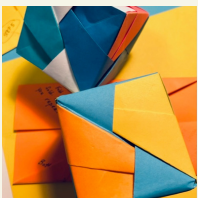
Grounding Values & Principles page 04

Grounding Terms & Understandings page 06



3 Opening Ourselves

PAGE 08



4 References & Resources

PAGE

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION



“WE ARE ALL RELATED. ... BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GOOD RELATIVES—TO NOT ONLY RECOGNIZE OUR KINSHIP BUT TO BE GOOD KIN?”

PATTY KRAWEC, *BECOMING KIN: AN INDIGENOUS CALL TO UNFORGETTING THE PAST AND REIMAGINING OUR FUTURE.*

2025 - LIAM HOOPER, MDIV

In my understanding of this thing we call relational fellowship, the motivating inquiry underlying all our shared heart-labor is this: exploring what it means to be a human being learning to be and become a self while living in an interdependent world of other persons seeking to do the same. Inherent within such inquiry lies the practical question: *understanding we are all related, what is demanded of us to learn to live well, kindly, compassionately, and justly together?*

While I am convinced that the answers to this set of questions is an ongoing, continuously evolving human project, I am clear about two things.

One, the only way to learn how to become and be fully human is to be willing to make a winding, wandering way through the messy, no less revelatory, often miraculous muck of human relationships.

And two, the only sure way to discover revelations for vision-casting a kind, compassionate, well-lived, and just life-way is to be actively engaged in relational learning together, with one another—especially, people with whom we might have little in common, who are not the people we have chosen merely because they think like we do, share our personal interests, and seldom challenge us. Coming together in circles of fellowship is, doubtless, a good place to learn and grow in the company of others—it’s a good place, perhaps, to learn to love one another.

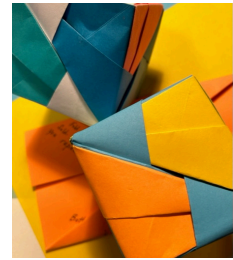
“Is love an emotion or an action? And how do we go about placing it at the very center of our lives? The kind of love Judaism speaks about is not an emotion or action; it’s an emotion *and* an action. It’s an existential posture, a life orientation, a way of holding ourselves in the world; it’s a way of life.”

Rabbi Shai Held



All Fellows Gatherings Rationale and Circle-Way Convening Guide

“As the saying goes, we are all of us stardust, but not only; we are also dirt, green growing things, rock, sand, lightning, wind and water: the stuff of everything, the stuff of one another.”
L. Hooper, MDiv



2025 - LIAM HOOPER, MDiv

Opening A Circle

There are, most surely, many ways for people to come together, to convene as a group. Whenever we gather, at the core of our coming together there is some variously conscious and unconscious coalescence of our inner and outward selves—that is, of our being, thinking, and doing—in time and space with one another. To be together intentionally, rather than merely in proximity, to create a communal circle of connection and conversation, means becoming deliberately attentive to our practices of being, thinking, and doing.

That is, to come together purposefully, deliberately, is to choose collectively to develop a practice and to share commitment to and responsibility for practicing that practice in community with each other.

One of the most effective ways to engage a relational practice with one another is to cast a circle. Archaeo-anthropological evidence teaches us that forming circles is one of the oldest and most enduring ways of gathering together. So important has the circle been to human communities that our ancestors concretized the communal nature of circles by erecting huge megalithic structures like [Gobekli Tepe](#) and more famously, [Avebury](#), [Stonehenge](#), or the many [stone circles in Scotland](#).

And so, as did our diverse ancestors before us, we call ourselves into a circle. Indeed, casting the circle itself is the first conscious act—among several—that invites us all, together, into the practice of a *Circle-Way*.

WHAT IS A CIRCLE-WAY?

a particular, consensually communal, and intentional way of being, thinking, listening, sharing, and relating together with care, courage, curiosity, commitment to and regard for one another’s personhood with equal responsibility for the care and welfare of the circle.

WHAT DOES THE CIRCLE DO FOR US?

By nature, a circle of relational communion is constituted by our willingness to form it. In turn, the circle embraces, connects, and binds together all constituent members. None is above another. None holds the center or its boundaries alone. No one member is more important than another. In a circle, we become an egalitarian community of differentiated, unique individuals gathered together in a common purpose. So situated, together we can agree upon, engage in, and hold a chosen circle-way—a values-and principles-based practice of being, thinking, listening, sharing, receiving, and relating with one another.

A circle, combined with an engaged practice to hold it, makes it possible for us to be truly relational with one another—and ultimately, with ourselves too. Unencumbered by titles, positions, prestige, and privileges conferred upon us by rather contrived meritocracies and positionalities, we become able to suspend our protective egos and regard ourselves and one another as equally valuable members of a single human family.

In her book, *The Sacred Art of Listening: Forty Reflections for Cultivating A Spiritual Practice*, Kay Lindahl offers these lessons gleaned from dialogue practitioners across disciplines and cultures:

**The more we understand about one another, the less we fear
The less we fear, the more we trust
The more we trust, the more our hearts open to love one another** (p 52)

***"We are equal because we are human beings...When we are courageous enough to honor ourselves, we offer everyone else their humanity...claiming our vocation to be fully human is the way we extend love to all others."* (Wheatley, 162-63)**

GROUNDING VALUES AND PRINCIPLES: OFFERING A CORE THEORY



My approach (pedagogical rationale) to relational fellowship, and certainly to the work of casting courageous circles, is shaped and informed by certain core beliefs and values. These are not the only beliefs I bring to this work. They are, however, formational. I offer these practical concepts for consideration and reflection.

~ **A circle of conversation is, among other things, a living system, consisting of autonomous individual persons**—each of whom belongs to and came to be who are they are (and are becoming) within interconnected webs of relational systems—and therefore, a circle consists of the collective enculturations and acculturations, experiences, learnings, stories, interests, questions, and yearnings embodied in the individuals who are the circle: a human ecosystem.

Consider Margaret Wheatley's observations:

"Life always and only organizes as systems of interdependency ... The recognition that individuals need each other lies at the heart of every system. From that realization, individuals reach out, and seemingly divergent self-interests develop into a system of interdependency."

~ Said another way: **A circle of courageous relational connection and conversation is a community.**

Consider Choctaw Elder, Steven Charleston's proposition:

"Community is how we respond to injustice. It is our unified reaction to oppression or bigotry. Community is how we hold diversity in equilibrium ... A diverse community is a constant learning experience. It is a school of awareness, a center of intellectual exchange."

~ **Each member of the community is an equally vital, embodied manifestation of the persistent is-ness and particularity of personhood**—a living, differentiated articulation of the interconnected, interdependent elemental matter that constitutes all that is and, therefore, every person is uniquely endowed with identity (with sense of self; selfhood), personality, dispositions, capabilities, and longings for expression, actualization, and belonging.

That is, we—each of us—are *equally weaver and tapestry on a continuously threading loom of personal experiences, histories, kin, cultures, communities, and social constructions, bound and connected to the constant interweavings of distinct bodiedness, dispositions, and expressions.*

We are, each of us, *persons formed by intricate, interconnected webs of biology, experiences, interpersonal interactions, histories, and countless sociocultural elements. As such, all of us matter, equally, because we are particular, embodied, selfhood-imbued matter existing in interconnected, interaffecting, interdependent relationships with all other matter—especially earthly matter and each other—all of us, going about striving to be and become persons in the same elemental world, together.*

As the saying goes, we are all of us stardust, but not only; we are also dirt, green growing things, rock, sand, lightning, wind and water: the stuff of everything, the stuff of one another.

~ **As such, every human person manifests a living, continually being written, ever unfolding, growing and evolving, multi-chaptered life story**—shaped and formed by all the experiences, circumstances, locations, and other lives they encounter—and *every embodied story, every human history—yours, ours, theirs, and mine—matters because each contributes to and expands the larger, continuously evolving, still-being-written, endlessly unfolding multi-chaptered story of the whole human species, past, present, and yet to come.*

~ **Discovery of this inherent inter-beingness among individuals can be fostered and grown** by creating, and inviting individuals into, *spaces that encourage:*

- ~ receiving each member as a valued, unique, sovereign person
- ~ moving beyond merely hearing to listening with regard, care, and compassion, without compulsion to comment, agree, persuade, or correct
- ~ bearing witness to others and to oneself
- ~ sharing individual/personal thoughts, stories, and experiences honestly
- ~ and developing a practice for learning to receive, witness, and hear others in ways that foster change—transforming persons by expanding worldviews, deepening knowledge beyond personal perspectives, and enhancing understanding of individual selves, the world, others, and therefore, those characteristic elements and qualities which might constitute a shared human nature.

Sayra Pinto, former WLI Director of Leadership Education has said:

“Listening is a skill that takes time and practice to develop. We are often taught to hear what others say so we can find what we agree on, or more often, how they agree with us. Hearing is a passive act of receiving that which is being said. Listening, on the other hand, demands an active stance from the listener, it involves relating to that which is being said. I believe that listening also has to do with witnessing the person that is saying that which is being listened to. When we listen to another, we receive the way they make sense of their world. A person is shaped by their lineage, the land they come from, and the experiences and learning done through their relationship with others. I call this one’s sovereign logic. To listen is to witness another’s sovereign logic, to relate what they are saying to their personhood.”

~ **Every circle is a diverse “school of awareness” and relational interaction; every member is a teacher, every member is a student.**

Consider these teachings from the **Pirkei Avot** (Chapters of the Fathers):

Make for yourself a teacher; acquire for yourself a friend. (1.6)

When two people sit together and exchange words of learning, the Divine Presence rests between them. (3.6)

Warm yourself at the fires of the wise. (2.15)

Who is wise? One who learns from every person.

Who is honored? One who honors every person. (4.1)

~ **Every circle contains and expands the one that came before...and, yet, no person ever steps in the same circle twice**—even when membership is consistent, each circle is a new articulation, an emerging expression, of all the persons, happenings, ideas, and experiences, that went before, making the circle possible.

~ **It is possible that to be changed by life, by all that we encounter and experience, is to become more consciously and deliberately who it is in us to be and become.**

As Wheatley has said: “Life becomes stronger and more capable through systems of collaboration and partnering, not through competition.”



GROUNDING TERMS & UNDERSTANDINGS

Given an overview of the underlying ideas, assumptions, and beliefs which accompany and shape the circle-way I am offering, it seems helpful to also provide some orientation to terms and definitions. Doing so offers some measure of a common lexicon, perhaps necessary for a shared understanding and, likely, for a shared practice.

~ **Convening:** *a consensual, communal act of coming together to meet in a particular place for some particular purpose, often in response to a call to assemble.* As such, convening expresses a series of actions that involve meeting as discrete individuals, gathered in a common purpose and united by a common accord—an act of the will to join, person to person, collectively. Relatedly...

~ **Commune** - from Old French (*comuner*) and Latin (*communia*): *a verb meaning, to make common, to share, to have dealings with, or to talk/communicate intimately; as a noun, a commune is a community organized and self-governed for an express purpose.*

To be communal, then, is to express a human capacity for seeking to create common space—through being, thinking, and doing together—in which members communicate and relate closely by the consent and self-regulation of the communing group. *It could be said, the circle is a commune.*

~ **Practice:** *the repeated application of a foundational idea, or set of ideas, into ways of thinking, being, and doing for a particular purpose; that is, a method of being, thinking, doing, carried out intentionally and performed with regularity and deliberate attention.*

A relational circle practice, then, is the application of a set of values and principles into ways of being, thinking, listening, sharing, and relating with self and others for the purpose of developing deeper relational capacities, building community, and fostering personal and communal growth.

~ **Relation:** broadly, is a noun meaning the way(s) in which two or more persons, ideas, concepts, or things are connected; the effect on or relevance of one thing or concept to another; a person who is connected to another/others by birth, marriage, adoption, or some other chosen familial connection; or in some cases, a person connected to another/others by a particular affiliation or bond (ex: sorority sisters, fraternal brothers, spiritual siblings, etc.).

As such, *to be relational with one another is to be connected, to have relevance, and affect each other.* That is, to be relational is to create embodied connections through being, thinking, and doing together—sharing thoughts, impressions, experiences, and feelings—in ways that change us by cultivating greater understanding of one another and deepening our knowing.

Specifically, in the work of relational fellowship, the heart-labor of the circle—undertaken in earnest—*guides us toward the roots of our connections and reveals them*, makes way for us to recognize and come to know the many larger-than-all-of-us ways we are all related (like everything else), and shows us ways to strengthen and fortify those connective through lines for the good of us all.

~ **Relationality:** an endowed capacity for experiencing and expressing the qualities, characteristics, dispositions, and actions of being interactively connected, having relevance to, and affecting one another, the living world around us (including non-human beings), our dispositions, circumstances, experiences, and perceptions. Relationality represents a core, perhaps primary, aspect of humanness. That is, relational potentiality can be viewed as an essential aspect of a shared humanity.

~ **Humanity:** is understood as the indwelling characteristics, capacities, potentials, essential elements, and qualities—indeed, even, longings—of an intrinsic, common, yet uniquely embodied human nature.



“If we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace it alone—at least, not for long: we need trustworthy relationships to sustain us, tenacious communities of support, to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. Taking an inner journey toward rejoining soul and role requires a rare but real form of community that I call a “circle of trust.””

Parker J. Palmer (A Hidden Wholeness)

CONSIDERING THESE CONCEPTS AND PRINCIPLES FOR A MOMENT :

What particular values do you carry with you into the work of relational fellowship?

What words or phrases come to mind that describe what you hope to bring to the heart-labor of the circle? What you hope to take with you?

What words or phrases describe how you hope to be received in the communal circle?

“People are like geodes. You never know how beautiful they really are or what they are made of until something breaks them open.”

Audrey Vivian (McIntosh) Brockman, Liam’s maternal grandmother



Opening Ourselves

In the heart labor of relational practice, we open a circle to open ourselves to one another that we may also open ourselves to ourselves and deepen our understanding—of others, the worlds we inhabit, our inherited stories, and those we tell ourselves about who we are, who our people are, and where we come from, and in the process, discover anew who we truly are and how we might become better relations.

As Patty Krawec observes (*Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future*):

“We can only do this if we are willing to understand our history differently, if we take our stories out of isolation and put them together. We need to revisit the stories we tell ourselves—about how we got here—and see something different, something that allows us to become relatives again” (p 17).

There are certainly many models for shaping the structural form and functionality of the circle—what some call the container—and there are many ways of engaging in an actual relational process. That is, there are certain interactive behavioral skills that are elemental to creating a shared space capable of cultivating deeper connections and understanding.

What follows is an overview of core values and select approaches to both structure and circle practice, taken from my own work and offered as both process prompts—places to begin—and suggestions out of which a group can build a suitable circle for themselves.

VALUES-BASED CIRCLE PRACTICES:

Values-based circle practices are ways of listening, sharing, and interacting behaviors and skills essential to the work of courageous circle casting



The following communal practices derive not only from gleanings about attitudes and behaviors that can foster relational growth proven through decades of sound human sciences research, but also from decades of training and experience in counseling, chaplaincy, ministry, and years of engaged experience with multiple forms of courageous conversation circles and other group processes from recovery groups to Quaker clearness practices, Jewish study groups, and even old school change-making activism practices.

Values-based practices are ways of being, thinking, sharing, listening, and relating with one another that can deepen relational connections and increase our understanding. I offer these attitudinal postures and behaviors as elements of a practice—all tried and true, some more essential than others—and invite those who gather to consider these suggestions, add to and/or take away, augment and enhance (or not) these ways of being, speaking, and listening to create, together, an agreed on practice.

Values-Based Circle Practices:

Being Present – *“The ultimate payoff for investing in relationships with others ... is the knowledge that you are not alone.”* (Wolfson, 44)

- ~ Cultivate *being here, now*
- ~ Cultivate courage—*dare to be here, in the unknown, in this place, with this people*
- ~ Cultivate curiosity
- ~ Slow down
- ~ Quiet assumptions and expectations—be willing to be surprised
- ~ Quiet the natural tendency to judge—adopt a nonjudgmental attitude
- ~ Quiet the need for recognition, status, and/or position
- ~ Quiet the compulsion to speak, to break or fill a silence
- ~ Bear witness—*dare to see and hear, witness and listen to one another as fellow humans*
- ~ Honor silence
- ~ Honor reflection
- ~ Honor accountability—taking ownership of what one says and does in circle
- ~ Honor and care for the circle—the circle holds members in community, equal to one another, relatable to, and connected to both one another and the circle members create

Listening – *“Listening is a creative force that transforms relationships...”* (Lindahl, 11-12)

- ~ Listen deliberately, with intention
- ~ Listen bravely
- ~ Listen for discovery
- ~ Listen to hear the heart of another person, to listen one another into being among us
- ~ Listen to connect
- ~ Listen for understanding
- ~ Listen for difference (not merely for sameness)
- ~ Listen to be present—to be *here, now, in this place, with this people*
- ~ Listen to learn more about how to love

“Listening well takes time, skill, and a readiness to slow down, to let go of expectations, judgments, boredom, self-assertiveness, defensiveness...when people experience the depth of being listened to like this, they also begin to listen to others in the same way” (Lindahl, 12).

Speaking – *“Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change—personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If we can sit together and talk about what’s important to us, we begin to come alive... We need time to sit together, to listen, to worry and dream together.”* (Wheatley, pp 7, 9)

- ~ Speak one at a time—one speaks; hearers listen
- ~ Speak from one’s own experience
- ~ Speak for oneself (not for others or the group; take care with and define “we” statements)
- ~ Speak using “I” statements (not “you”)
- ~ Speak to connect (not to teach or to correct)
- ~ Speak from one’s heart
- ~ Speak for self-understanding
- ~ Speak to utter one’s self into being—*here, now, in this place, with this people*

“Every soul needs to express itself. Every heart needs to crack itself open. Every one of us needs to move from anger to healing, from denial to consciousness, from boredom to renewal. These needs did not arise yesterday. They are among the most ancient of human yearnings ” (p 9).

Rabbi Alan Lew. *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation.*

A CONVENING MODEL

A convening model is a way of shaping, or structuring, a circle to make grounding space for a deliberate relational practice



2025 - LIAM HOOPER, MDIV

Alongside many ways to frame practices for being, listening, and speaking together, there are surely many ways to structure a circle process: a set of movements that create a space for engaging an intentional circle-way. Recognizing that we who gather do so with a diversity of experience, I offer one convening model which I have developed over several years of experience, training, and experimentation. It is, perhaps, an orientation of sorts, a refresher, or maybe, an illustration that sparks something new—a box of tools to keep, leave sitting around, use to craft something new and different, or discard altogether.

In any case, this convening practice inheres within and expresses ideas central to my pedagogical orientation to relational heart labor and, certainly, to courageous circle making. This model employs a convening process, or structure, developed by Dr. Meredith Doster for use during the 2020-22 class (my class) of the William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations. I do so because Dr. Doster’s model embodies elements from a handful of traditions that also are foundational to my own training, experience, and values. Equally, Dr. Doster’s mnemonic use of C-words provides a useful structure that is easy to remember. This framework owes much to Quaker Meeting elements and Clearness Committee practices (made accessible to non-Quakers by Parker Palmer) which I also learned in seminary and have practiced for some time.

Calling In

involves (briefly) calling ourselves into the circle by naming ourselves, listening to, and receiving each other into the conversation space, using responses to a prompt; typically, the prompt involves stating who we are, and in some way sharing what it means to us to “have and hold and honor” this “particular conversation” (Doster), whatever that may be in our group discernment.

Centering

involves “hearing a shared invitation,” or reflection, and “holding space for quiet reverie that sets a tone” (Doster) for our time together. Especially when people come together across distances, lines of particularity, and difference, a poem, reflection, meaningful quote of some sort, or an image, followed by thoughtful reflection, can not only call us to a deeper settling-in with each other, but also within our own bodied selves, and the time, place, and space we inhabit together

Core Values

When we gather as particular individuals hopeful of co-creating meaningful conversation and communion with one another, we carry into the circle with us (among other things) the values and principles that matter to each of us. Holding these with intention calls us into shared responsibility and accountability to one another, our circle, and good communal care.

Most commonly, this aspect of convening is referred to as setting group norms—values-based agreements for who and how we will be with one another in our thinking, being, and doing together. Setting these parameters together has, itself, become a kind of norm and it generally goes fairly smoothly. Holding ourselves and one another responsible for and accountable to these principles, however, can become quite another thing. Sometimes, habitual practices take over. And sometimes, impact diverges from intent. When this happens, there are multiple non-shaming, non-judgmental ways for members to call attention back to the practice, to the values and agreements that hold the circle.

For example, someone might simply say: “I notice our conversation has gotten lively - which is fine - but I am also feeling the need to take a moment to breathe and revisit our commitments to one another.”

Or, a brave member (or more than one member) who notices divergence from the path might find a gentle way to name that it’s easy to get off track when conversation gets lively and call the group back to agreed upon norms. There are other ways of calling a circle back to its guiding practices—some of which are very low-intervening.

One methodology is provided at the end of this convening guide, in **Appendix 1**.

Conversing

Holding conversations—or dialogues—with one another serves as a core method of relational connection-building across the various Friday Fellowship classes; the practice of speaking from and for ourselves, while engaging ourselves in listening with openness to one another, expands our understanding of one another, ourselves, and our shared, strangely particular-yet-common human condition.

Sometimes, it is not always easy to discern when a person has merely paused for a moment—as they think more deeply, or perhaps, hold a heavy emotion, or gather internal resources—or whether they have actually finished speaking. Various established traditions, such as recovery group models and Quakers, have their own ways of signaling when the floor is open again after a person shares.

In Judaism, we have a long tradition of using two simple words to convey that we have spoken from our hearts and we have listened, intently, to others as they share. In various types of Jewish circles, we use **the Hebrew word, *Debarti*** (pronounced: deh-bar-tee), to make others aware that we have finished saying what was on our hearts to share. **When we say “Debarti,” we are saying, “I have spoken.”**

Likewise, we use **the Hebrew word, *Shemati*** (pronounced: sheh-mah-tee), to indicate we have not simply heard another speaking, have *listened with our hearts* to a person who has earnestly shared their thoughts, feelings, wonderings, and/or concerns with us. **When we say “Shemati,” we are saying, “I have listened with my heart and I have understood.”**

In Quaker practices, an extended silence is taken and honored, assuring that individuals have time to fully receive what another person has shared and, equally, to discern when it is perhaps a good time

to share one's own thoughts. In many recovery traditions, people offer gratitude for the space to speak, saying things such as "thanks for letting me share," or a simple, "that's all I've got." In response, group members often reply, "thanks for sharing," or silence is held until another speaks.

My point is that a healthy circle-way includes some practice by which members endeavor to listen deeply and avoid accidentally stepping on one another. Circle members are free, and encouraged, to decide together how to proceed—usually, as part of considering core values and setting agreements. (For reference, **a deeper explanation of Debarti and Shemati is found in Appendix 2.**)

Clearness

As a common practice in religious/spiritual, therapeutic, and other group traditions, the idea of clearness is known by many names; nonetheless. It is a valuable and important practice accurately described in **Dr. Doster's own words**.

"Convenings can deepen our awareness, challenge our knowing, and invite both individual and collective reckoning. As you begin wrapping up your conversations, pause. Can you quiet hearts and minds to reflect on what has been said and offered? Being clear to close does not require consensus or completion. Instead, it signals a personal engagement with the fullness of a conversation. Often, convenings can bring up work we each have to do in our own lives. These learnings and teachings are not reason to hold up a closing. Instead, if there are lingering questions that need to be asked or learning that needs to be named and deepened with this group, please take the time to honor unfinished business. If your group is not clear to close, sit with one another to name and honor what needs saying, hearing, and doing. You will not be able to step into substantive work at this time, but you might note if and when and how the conversation needs to continue."

Closing

Dr. Doster has reminded us, **"a circle that has been opened also invites closing,"** which involves taking a few moments together to honor what has been shared, spoken, heard, and received. Closing is a shared process and can involve choosing to voice a gift or learning gained from the circle, a gratitude, a revelation or a question that one is taking away from the experience.

This convening framework is offered as *one way to shape our group discussions*. It is an invitation, not a requirement. We can choose something else. There are many ways and each matters. What matters most, presently, is that we come together—however that may be.

"Healing occurs when others witness us and when we witness each other. It happens when we know we are seen and when we deepen our ability to see others and be with them as they are—exactly as they are. It happens when we are in a circle with one another, singing, celebrating, sobbing, and questioning. It happens when we take a sacred pause and ask what we need. When we are healing in community, the unraveling, unfolding, opening, and revealing occurs over time and in relationship with others."

Michelle Cassandra Johnson, *We Heal Together: Rituals and Practices for Building Community and Connection*. p 25



REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Touchstone, 1996.

Charleston, Steven. *Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder's Meditations on Hope and Courage*. Broadleaf Books, 2021.

Doster, Meredith. *Person, Place, and Thing: Beyond the Noun of Leadership*. 2020-2022, William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations. cdn.ymaws.com/www.fridayfellowship.org/resource/resmgr/2020-22fellowship/ff2020-22singlepageoflinksd.pdf

"Foundations of the Courage and Renewal Approach." *Center for Courage and Renewal*, 2022. couragerenewal.org/foundations-participant-portfolio-3/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2022/08/Foundations-of-the-Courage-Renewal-Approach.pdf.

"Gobekli Tepe." *UNESCO, World Heritage Convention*, 16 Apr. 2021. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1572>.

Held, Shai. *Judaism Is About Love: Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024.

Johnson, Michelle C. *We Heal Together: Rituals and Practices for Building Community and Connection*. Shambhala Publications, 2023.

Krawec, Patty. *Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future*. Broadleaf Books, 2022.

Lew, Alan. *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*. Little, Brown and Co., 2003.

Narvaez, Darcia. "The Evolved Nest," <https://evolvednest.org>.

Palmer, Parker. *A Hidden Wholeness: the Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. 2009, Jossey-Bass. couragerenewal.org/library/a-hidden-wholeness-the-journey-toward-an-undivided-life/

Pinto, Sayra. "The Power of Story and Witness." *William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations*. [SayraPintoPost1-Circling.pdf \(ymaws.com\)](https://www.ymaws.com/www.fridayfellowship.org/resource/resmgr/2020-22fellowship/ff2020-22singlepageoflinksd.pdf)

Pirkei Avot, Seder Nezikin, Mishnah. Sefaria, www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot?tab=contents.

"Standing Stones." *Visit Scotland, Scotland*, 2025. <https://www.visitscotland.com/things-to-do/attractions/historic/standing-stones>

"Stonehenge." *English Heritage, United Kingdom*, 2025. <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge>

Topa, Wahinkpe and Darcia Narvaez. *Restoring the Kinship Worldview: Indigenous Voices Introduce 28 Precepts for Rebalancing Life on Planet Earth*. North Atlantic Books, 2022.

Wheatley, Margaret J. "Bringing Schools Back to Life: Schools as Living Systems." *Writings*. [Margaret J. Wheatley: Bringing Schools Back to Life \(margaretwheatley.com\)](https://margaretwheatley.com)

_____. *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2001.

"Wiltshire, Avebury." *National Trust, United Kingdom*, 2024. <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/wiltshire/avebury>

Wolfson, Ron. *Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community*. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013.

Naming & Identifying Norms -

Honoring shared, nonjudgmental responsibility:

Doubtless, at some point, we have all been in a space where the group process for dialogue was lost. Perhaps an agreement was made to speak only in the first person, using “I” statements, and suddenly, people shifted to an ambiguous “we” or to the second person, speaking a collection of “you” statements.

When a process goes off course, a group may express a range of responses, from letting the agreement slide to calling out individuals who slip off the agreed upon path. Sometimes, unintentional embarrassment, shaming, and even harm occur. In some cases, letting one agreed upon norm slide leads to an unraveling of other agreements. Numerous, and various, models have been developed to create processes that both teach and encourage shared responsibility, while also cultivating communal care.

In my own travels, I have learned from recovery communities, movement coalitions, and a host of other collaborative, power-sharing egalitarian models. A practice I have come to appreciate involves creating signifiers (numbers, letters) for agreed upon norms.

How a signifier works

- each agreement is given a number or a letter (ex: 1, 2, 3 ... or, A, B, C, etc.)
 - these are posted in some way for group awareness
 - when a misstep in practice occurs, members who notice speak only the number/letter.
- In some groups, members use paper to write the signifier, and simply raise it up. This practice does several things by offering:
- gentle, non-shaming reminders of the agreements
 - a call to the whole group to pay attention to intentional practice
 - affirmation that the group is a community of individuals with equal standing, value, shared commitment, responsibility, and guardianship of the whole
 - opportunity for all members to develop habits rooted in shared values, boundaries, practices, and communal care.

This group process is offered as a suggested practice—as *one way*, not the only way. Together, we are free and invited to discern a circle-way that meets the needs of our gathering and our members. Sharing in the process of developing a practice is, itself, a practice that matters.



Debarti & Shemati - Practices for Deep Listening and Sharing:

Holding conversations—or dialogues—with one another serves as a core method of relational connection-building across the various types of gatherings; the practice of speaking from and for ourselves, while engaging ourselves in listening with openness to one another, expands our understanding of one another, ourselves, and our shared, strangely particular-yet-common human condition.

In the hope of honoring such heart-labor, *I am offering a particular practice, an invitation into a way of being, listening, and speaking together.*

Debarti and Shemati

At the core, **Debarti** and **Shemati** can be understood as **a practice of speaking and listening through the heart—of speaking from one’s heart, and being heard from and listening to the heart of another.**

These Hebrew words describe a single, unified, and very old practice, most commonly used now in meditation and/or learning circle settings.

Debarti - Hebrew, 1st-person: **“I have spoken”** - from the root word, Dabar, a noun, meaning word, with emphasis on the sum of what is spoken, the gist, or essence of words; it can also mean: thing, implement, speech, word, or discourse.

As a verb, dabar, means “to speak,” but not merely to utter; rather, to speak about something, thus, **debarti, means “I spoke,” or “I have spoken,” from the heart about a particular something.**

Shemati - Hebrew, 1st-person: **“I have heard”** - from the root word, **Shema, meaning “to hear,”** with attention, interest, and a heart seeking understanding; shema means to listen (hear) and understand; **therefore, shemati, means “I listened, heard, and understood.”**

In Practice, it goes something like this:

When a person feels moved to share, they speak. With hearts and minds open, hearers listen to what is being shared. Once a speaker has conveyed their thoughts, they say, “Debarti” (indicating, “I have spoken”).

When listeners discern they have heard and understood the speaker, they may respond by saying Shemati (“I have heard”). If a person needs clarification to reach a “shemati,” or thinks they may have misunderstood, it is appropriate to ask for clarification. Only when a hearer has listened and understood, is “shemati” spoken. Hearing with understanding does not require or imply shared experience, although some measure of resonance may arise, nor does “shemati” require agreement. In turn, as moved to do so, another person shares.

Persons who receive, listen carefully, with a heart-quest for understanding. And so the circle turns around this practice of listening, receiving, and sharing with a heart-mind presence.

This process does and encourages several things, particularly:

- slowing the pace of listening and speaking
- lessening potential for talking over others and/or interrupting
- encouraging silences between speakers, cultivating deeper reflection
- cultivating acceptance of diverse ways of processing, thinking/ reflecting, sharing
- deepening listening skills, hearing, and understanding
- allowing the dialogue—like its creators—to breathe.

