

Listening Matters: Circle Helps On Four Levels

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In the summer of 2011 I got to spend a week with a good friend and colleague, Roq Gareau. He was temporarily stationed at the northernmost border crossing between Alaska and Canada's Yukon, a crossing used primarily by gold miners and adventurous travelers. Our week was filled with good listening and a light structure of Circle.

On one of the days in the Yukon, we hiked about a mile to the north of my friend's station. Across spongy moss-covered permafrost and between smatterings of bear and caribou scat. We found a place to sit for a bit, a place that felt very untouched by human hand. When I cast my eyes into the rolling mountains further north from this very northern latitude, I felt very aware that there were no large cities in that direction. Just a lot of land that would at some point give way to ice.



That spot in the Yukon still remains with me as the quietest place I have ever experienced. The kind of quiet that makes you pay attention to listening. Silence was palpable. Not just "less noise" kind of silence interrupted by the background hum of a fan. A full and far-reaching silence.

There is a notion that I have learned from one of my primary Circle teachers, Christina Baldwin, that I

want to state and then tweak. "Fifteen seconds of silence in contemporary culture," she says, "can be profound." It was that on that day. And I'm glad it was more than fifteen seconds.

As a culture, I would suggest that many of us have raised chatter — filling communications and relationships rather than listening for the natural silence of them — to an unchallengeable norm. Many people that I meet have grown uncomfortable with even short moments of pause. "They're awkward." "They're uncomfortable." "They're unnatural." We tell ourselves these things, don't we.

The tweak I want to offer on Christina's statement is that by extension, "fifteen seconds of listening can also be profound." And I want more than fifteen seconds of that too.

Does it matter that we listen well with one another? OK, that's a baited question. Yes, of course it matters. Most of us want to do our work well. Most of us want to live our lives well. Ask any communications person, counselor, therapist, spiritual director, or even a good friend and they'll spit out their agreement in a heartbeat that listening matters.

Yet, despite the obviousness of this, does it not seem that our ability to listen, particularly in groups, is becoming increasingly challenged? The expectation of a quickened pace, the demand for sharp talking points, the polished presentational form that attempts to mask the real messiness underneath — these all challenge listening don't they? There helpful in their place, indeed. But they impede an essential listening for what is underneath all of that.

I hear many people asking for help. How do we listen differently? What keeps it simple? What keeps it focussed and purposeful? What cuts

through the mere facsimiles of listening — the talking over each other; the tolerating an opinion only to pounce on it at first opportunity, the rushing and fidgeting that go along with insane pressure to get done — and restores us to a listening that is profound?

Circle is a core methodology for me. I use it often. Because it helps. Particularly when I want to get to a deeper and more satisfying level of listening. When I want actions to have more staying power.

Recently I listened to a webinar in which another colleague, Phil Cass, described his use of Circle over a 16 year period, every Thursday, to meet with his senior leadership team that linked four related health organizations in Columbus, Ohio. “Those meetings changed who we were with one another. They changed how we worked together, what we accomplished, and how we supported each other in very demanding environments. Those meetings changed my life and our lives.”

Circle makes possible a lot of things that I notice most human beings are craving, and that are needed in today’s communal environments, whether with a senior leadership team, a community nonprofit, or a family. When I teach Circle and ask people what makes it different than just reorganizing the chairs, the responses are common. “There is good listening.” “There is important sharing.” “There is witnessing.” “You get to know one another.” “You get to know yourself.” “You get to hear things you normally don’t hear from others.” “You get to speak more honestly.”

In my experience, Circle helps four levels of listening to occur: to self, to each other, to the group, to the subtle. Circle, among all other things, is most centrally that for me — a way to listen well in a world that has so frequently replaced listening with noise. Circle is not a whiz-bang, flash-in-the-pan, new-fangled methodology. And no, I don’t believe Circle is a fix all for all situations. But good connecting and good listening will always help. Whether we need to meander a bit together, or get stuff done, or return to each other to figure out what we’ve learned.

Circle helps with listening on four levels:

to self
to each other
to the group
to the subtle.

1. Listening To Self

Back in the 90s, one of my favorite grad school professors was a man that said, “sometimes I need to say it out loud to know what I think.” I relate to that. Circle, with its deliberateness of a center to catch individual expressions, mix them with what others say (note that this is not a time for providing answers), and slow cook them like a good stew is bound to stir up a few surprises and clarities about ourselves. “I didn’t know that I really thought that.” Or “I didn’t know that I thought that so strongly.” Circle helps with a self clarity that isn’t possible in isolation.

2. Listening To Each Other

When I have hosted Circles for groups that have been together for a long time — colleagues in particular — it has caught my attention that people learn a few things about each other that they didn’t know before. I’ve heard expressions, “I’ve known you for 20 years and I’ve never known that about you.”

Contemporary work culture has advocated a fierce distinction between professional and personal life. There are times when that distinction is very helpful — some things are private. However, rejecting the personal actually diminishes the quality of the professional capability in many settings. To interrupt the pattern of mere transactional exchange often common in work settings, is to create room for a different and needed kind of knowing of each other.

3. Listening To The Group

Ann Linnea is another primary teacher for me of Circle over the last fifteen years. One of the premises I've heard her claim often is that there is always more wisdom in the collective of the group than there is in any one individual. It stands to reason doesn't it. In today's context of increasingly complex and intractable challenges, we need to hear from multiple perspectives. To become aware of blind spots. To see more.

I want to offer one additional layer and nuance here, a peek under the hood that is Circle. Not only are we listening to ourselves and to each other, which I suppose you can compile into the group as a sum, we are hearing more than the sum. Roq, with whom I was with in Yukon calls this "activating the composite being." It's the "all of us." There isn't parts (which is still conceptually challenging to hold, right). There is only the group. The words that are being spoken are coming from that group being. Not from individuals. If you can get that, it's a moment of listening to write home about.

4. Listening To the Subtle

Though I accept that there are as many versions of subtle as there are drops of water in a lake, I will assert that however any of us name that subtle, listening to the unseen is an important category and that Circle helps with that. Spirit? Sure. Ancestors? Sure. Nature itself? Sure. The deeper story in us as individuals? Yes. The deeper purpose of what a team is all about? Absolutely.

I will continue to assert that there is always more unseen than is seen. There is more unheard than is heard. In offices. In organizations. In communities. In families. It's not a criticism of those forms. It just a reality that sets the imperative for us to be perpetually curious. You never get the whole movie or it's subjective meaning. You never get every note played at the concert. There is just more than is possible for any individual processing to get it all. With so many of the people I work with, they are hungry for this level of listening, even unfamiliar as it can be.

I'm fortunate to be picking up some more significant teaching of Circle in this 2016 calendar year. Along with a friend and colleague, Amanda Fenton, and with some other global colleagues, we are helping to carry the tradition that is Circle and the 20+ years of legacy from Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea to a next generation of scale and scope.

If you want to develop the best foundation for today's context of applied participative leadership, I suggest learning more of Circle. It's really the place to start and return too. Learn more of that at www.learnthecircleway.com and at www.thecircleway.net.

I left Alaska and the Yukon with a stone in my pocket to remind me of listening that day. To remind me of the quiet that was in that outer world and that seeped to my inner world, stilling me for even a few mere moments that felt profound.



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