

## Emergence and The Circle Way

Tennessee Woolf — July 2016

Recently, in working with a core team preparing for a multi-day, system-wide event in a faith community, six of us were sharing reflections during a video conference call. We met in the format of The Circle Way. For this group it meant we started by naming the purpose of the call. We had a deliberate check-in. All were invited to share needs, and to ask for needed help. We had a deliberate check-out. Smooth and simple.

This was a call that was less about the details of the event — room setup, supplies needed, and when breaks would occur. This was a call that was more about being in learning together — what were we each learning about ourselves on this team, and about how each of us was learning to face the unexpected, and about how each of us was learning to hold responsibility for a whole group while simultaneously tending to individuals. These were pastors. There was a lot of nodding heads as we each contributed and used The Circle Way to witness each other. We took turns — I think of it as having passed a virtual talking piece.

Our conversation moved into discussing the dynamic tension that exists of participants preparing discussion topics before their multi-day event (a fixed agenda), compared to waiting and seeing where energy lay when the group of 200 would be together (a dynamic agenda that comes from emergence). Most of us know that there is no absolute answer to this that can be applied across all circumstances. But that conversation with that core team helped me to remember that part of their job, and I believe the job of many of us who convene groups, is to create the conditions for emergence to occur.

“Emergence is the game,” I said to them — yes, there’s still a 14 year-old in me that wants to make it a game. Emergence is not the familiar skill that is showing up and willing data or meaning upon one another like can happen in many classrooms. It is less about imposing, and selling or winning a perspective. Emergence is a less familiar skill (though I would say it is one that we are remembering, not learning as new) that is listening for the surprise that shows up among people engaging together, because they are interacting in words, and sometimes play, and sometimes silence that a circle can offer. Emergence requires letting go of some preconceptions. It means listening well with others and speaking a truth without posturing it. It’s paying exquisite attention to what is showing up in the together part that can’t show up in the not together part. “This is not a 100-level skill, the marker for most entry level college classes,” I shared with that faith community team. “This is a 500-level skill. It is a graduate class.”



I know that there will always be many layers of working together that exist simultaneously. Rooms do need to be set up. Supplies do need to be ordered. Breaks do need to be planned. And, to be clear, there are good keynotes and didactic learning that The Circle Way can really effectively follow or precede. But the skill of working with emergence is one of those underlying approaches that changes everything. Not just meetings,

but also the day to day norm of how we are together and how we attend to one another, and how we nuance into the future, the sourcing of “us” rather than “I.”



Get ready friends. If you haven't registered yet, we have two spots left for [The Circle Way Practicum, August 17-22, 2016](#) on Whidbey Island. If you are coming, Amanda Fenton and I will be talking about this. We will be inviting the full group of participants to learn more about how The Circle Way helps us to welcome emergence. That means surprise, sometimes. That means confirmation, sometimes. That means essential listening and participation as a core competency all of the time.