

*Relational Power:
Win Friends, Influence Others,
and End Loneliness Through
the Practice of Authentic
Relating*

1st Edition Draft (v1.07)

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*“If we were all to sit in a circle and confess our sins,
we would laugh at each other for lack of
originality” – Kahlil Gibran*

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With gratitude to my many mentors, in particular Jerry Jud, Victor Baranco, Werner Erhard, Marshall Rosenberg, and Dieter Duhm. I rest on the shoulders of giants.

An Authentic Relating Parable

Two monks, an old one and a younger one, had lived together for many years in a cave. In all that time, they had never had a fight or even an argument. They were so poor that all they owned were a few blankets and a single bowl which they shared.

One day, the young monk spoke to the old one: *“My dear brother, we have spent many happy years together, but the time has come for me to go. I want us to separate our belongings and since we only have one bowl, let's break it in two and each take half.”*

The old monk replied: *“Oh my precious friend, I am sad to hear this, and I honor your choice. But what's the point of breaking the bowl? Please take it for yourself, I can eat out of my hand.”*

The young monk said: *“Absolutely not. I don't want anything of yours, and I don't want to give up anything of mine. Let's break the bowl and make a clean separation.”*

The old monk looked at the younger one intently, was silent for a moment, and finally said: *“As you wish”*, and handed him the bowl.

The young monk threw the bowl against the wall with all his strength, shattering it into a thousand pieces, and yelled: *“why won't you ever fight with me, asshole?”*

Moral of this story

Practice Authentic Relating, and save the china

Contents

Preface: Notes on the incremental publishing of this book	8
Introduction: How I finally got a life (after 40 years of trying), and some key conceptual takeaways	9
From 2016 to 2021	9
From the fall of 2021 to now.....	11
Case study: Own your characterology (heads-up, this is going to be brutal).....	13
It starts with self-knowledge	15
Circling is not enough; and other words of advice.....	17
Moving forward: how to read this book.....	18
PART 1: THE RELATIONAL WEALTH BLUEPRINT: CIRCLING, AUTHENTIC RELATING AND EFFECTIVE EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION	19
Part 1 of this book is your “Authentic Relating Bootcamp”	19
Part 2 describes the cultural context of the work (hint: they won’t instantly love you to pieces or hail you as a savior)	20
Part 3 we return to practical problems in effective emotional communication.....	20
Chapter 1: Practical Relational Leadership through the Authentic Relating practice - the 30,000 foot view.....	21
The ingredients of the “true joy of life”, and how to find them.....	21
Authentic Relating compared to other transformational modalities	24
A brief history of Authentic Relating and Circling.....	25
Origins in the Bay Area	25
So, what happened to Authentic Relating?.....	26
Where we stand today	27
Circling variations, and copyright issues around the “Circling” brand	27
The practices of Authentic Relating and Circling.....	28
Circling (or Authentic Relating <i>with</i> shared context).....	28
Circling versus Non-Violent Communication	29
Why Circling is so developmental: the “love bootcamp”	30
What makes Authentic Relating so powerful	31
Authentic Relating Games	33
“Invisible Circling”, or Authentic Relating <i>without</i> shared context ..	34
Moving forward: Non-Violent Communication	36
Chapter 2: NVC and Circling, how they complement each other; Learning the language of feelings and needs.....	37
Introduction to emotional communication, both inside and outside the NVC model.....	37

Case study: the OFNR model, and compare-and-contrast NVC and Authentic Relating.....	39
The difference between a feeling and a judgment / evaluation	43
Needs as a gift	45
Chapter 3: Introduction to Circling.....	47
Purpose of this chapter	47
Can you learn Circling from a book? And where to begin?	47
Circling in a nutshell: the goal of Circling	48
Logistics of Circling.....	50
Why Circle?	51
1. Circling is fun!.....	51
2. Circling is developmental	51
3. Circling is a global movement for creating a better society.....	52
The problem of defining and writing about Circling	52
How it actually works: the “minimal viable Circle”	53
Vulnerable sharing	54
Sharing impacts, empathy, and appreciations	55
Moving forward	56
Chapter 4: My framework for emotional literacy; The impact of large-scale developmental trauma; Coaching and story-telling in Circling; Emotional charge and the practice of giving withholds.....	57
My framework for emotional literacy: the masculine and feminine poles of love	57
The masculine and feminine poles of love.....	57
The Yin and the Yang of Circling: Connection Intent vs. Developmental Intent	59
Jerry Jud, “love is an intention”, and the Circler / Circlee dynamic	60
Sexual Polarity according to David Deida and Victor Baranco.....	62
The impact of large-scale developmental trauma.....	63
Ideas, Story-telling, Advice-giving, and Coaching in Circling and Authentic Relating.....	64
The nature of emotional charge and the practice of giving withholds ..	66
Understanding the nature of anger	67
You don’t need to get what you want if you can express what you want.....	69
The practice of giving withholds (with shared context).....	69
Chapter 5: Circling best practices: the “living laboratory of love” and how to make it work for you	72
Circling vs. Authentic Relating.....	72
The problem of “Authentic Relating on the street”	73
1. Notice feelings and body sensations.....	73
2. Connect with the group – up to a point (follow your aliveness)	74

3. “Get Their World”: Lead from Attention, Curiosity, and Empathy ...	75
4. Validate and Appreciate.....	78
5. Lead from Vulnerability.....	81
6. Share Impact, Offer Reflection and Inquiry.....	85
7. Own Your Experience (Communicate Responsibly).....	91
8. Make Right, Not Wrong (Find People Right, Approve of them).....	93
9. Be Impactable.....	94
10. Honor Yourself (Handling Conflict).....	94
11. Welcome Everything.....	97
12. Slow Down.....	98
13. Surrender Gracefully.....	100
Conclusion.....	101

PART 2: CULTURAL TRAUMA, CULT PSYCHOLOGY, AND INTEGRAL 2ND TIER CONSCIOUSNESS EMERGENCE..... 102

Chapter xxx: Trauma is good for you: Developmental trauma and human psycho-spiritual development.....	102
Chapter xxx: The pervasiveness of Cult Psychology, and what you can do about it. Neurosis as failed adaptation.....	102
Chapter xxx: Integral Psychology, Spiral Dynamics, and Circling.....	102
Chapter xxx: You are not alone: you are part of the worldwide emergence of Integral 2nd tier consciousness (lead, follow, or get out of the way).....	102

PART 3: REVISITING EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION: MORE TOOLS AND RESOURCES..... 103

Chapter xxx: All relationships are projections (grin and bear it).....	103
Chapter xxx: Own your characterology: Get to know it and befriend it (there are NO bad characterologies, there is only unconsciousness; with one notable exceptions).....	103
Chapter xxx: Dealing with your family: In relationship, everyone is right (teach only love, and when you can’t, walk away).....	103
Chapter xxx: the Authentic Relating cheat-sheet: Double your appreciations, surrender/apologize gracefully, and stop trying to be right (easy-peasy. Everything else is gravy).....	103
Chapter xxx: You are probably, at times, a dick (or an asshole or a bitch): Don’t make yourself wrong for it, but don’t ignore it either	103
Chapter xxx: Life is difficult: Get over it (you don’t choose your karmic role and destiny).....	103
Conclusion: Next steps?.....	104

APPENDIX A: Authentic Relating Organizations and Resources . 105

APPENDIX B: Other books by Marco..... 106

As Lovers Do: Sexual and Romantic Partnership as a Path of Transformation.....	106
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Circling and Authentic Relating Practice Guide.....108
Broke, Single, Crazy and Old: The Redemption of a Sex and Love Addict
.....109

Preface: Notes on the incremental publishing of this book

This book is the sequel to my [Circling and Authentic Relating Practice Guide](#), which is the most popular book on the practice of Circling within the Authentic Relating tradition. It includes much of the practical advice from the Circling Guide, including the nature of the practice, the history of the movement, ways you can engage, what to do and say in formal groups, etc.; **so if you have NOT read the Circling Guide, skip it and read this book instead.**

If you are not familiar with Circling or Authentic Relating, here is what you need to know: Circling is a group conversation practice, and part of a rapidly-growing worldwide movement called "Authentic Relating". It is a unique developmental practice that is about "getting somebody's world", being seen and accepted for who we really are, and feeling connected to other human beings and part of a larger whole. Circling may also be our best modern-day hope for creating a kinder and gentler society, one that would be less polarized and more attuned to real human needs. And on top of all this, Circling is super-fun and very affordable!

In contrast to the Circling Guide, the focus here is more on what I call "Authentic Relating on the street" (i.e. Authentic Relating with people who *don't* know the practice), as a powerful tool for personal and social transformation. Perhaps even *the* most powerful, open-source, widely-available human transformational modality ever invented; or, as per Werner Erhard, *"more than a revolution: the beginning of the transformation of the quality of life on this planet"*.

This is the DRAFT (v1.07) version of the book, which will be greatly expanded in the near future. The plan is to "publish incrementally" new versions as they come out every few months. If you buy the Kindle, it should automatically update to the latest version; and if you buy the paperback, simply write to me from my website www.marcbeneteau.com and I will send you the current version on pdf. My hope is to generate feedback, case stories, interest and engagement in the A/R community, *prior* to its final publication (hopefully through a commercial publisher). Maybe even to crowd-source the whole book and have it be a community-generated project.

I have an agenda to bring Authentic Relating more into the mainstream. I have, for instance, a withhold towards Brené Brown, that Circling and Authentic Relating are the *precise* answer to the program she advocates, and yet it's not mentioned in any of her books that I am aware of.

Introduction: How I finally got a life (after 40 years of trying), and some key conceptual takeaways

“The true test of your spiritual success is the happiness of the people around you” – Rudi (Swami Rudrananda)

From 2016 to 2021

This book is a sequel and expansion of my [Circling and Authentic Relating Practice Guide](#), which is available on the web, and on Amazon in all formats, including audiobook. The Circling Guide covers well the history of the movement, of where Circling and Authentic Relating sit within the larger “we-space” community, along with a practical guide on how to Circle effectively, etc.; and so I am continuing to make it available for free or small donation on the web.

This book is the higher-level perspective, the “30,000 foot view”, of what I have discovered and how I have evolved in my 6 years within the Authentic Relating (or A/R) movement. It does include all the practical advice from the Circling Guide. I am offering here a theoretical and practical guide on how you can accelerate your own development in a way that gives you access to authentic happiness and power, through the practice of Circling within the Authentic Relating tradition.

My bold claim is that if you follow the ideas and the methodology presented in this book, engage with the Authentic Relating and Circling movement, and then take what you have learned into the world, you will achieve relational wealth. Relational wealth is, and always has been, the most valuable form of wealth, because it’s actually a very small step from relational wealth to success in the world (and the opposite is *not* true – success in the world will *not* by itself bring you happiness or relational wealth). More on this topic below. Even after becoming a competent relational leader, you may still feel lonely and/or horny at times; but loneliness will be more of a choice, and you will be less in reaction to it. You can be both happy *and* successful, and also fundamentally deepen your spiritual attunement, as in the opening quote of this chapter. In the next chapter we will start to unpack how this works, and why Authentic Relating and Circling are so powerful.

Some readers may find this introduction too much about me and be bored. Or else too long.

My response to the first objection is that it's not possible to write a really useful book about Authentic Relating without getting intensely personal. If my personal story (or characterology) is uninteresting or irrelevant to you, and/or you are already sold on the acquisition of relational intelligence and want to get to business immediately, you may want to just skip to the next chapter, Part 1: The Relational Wealth Blueprint.

To the second objection, I will share my purpose: should you choose to read *only* this introduction chapter, that you would still walk away with at least *one* idea that will transform you. My style is rather direct and I want to maximize your takeaways in one sitting.

Anyway: thank you for reading, and on with the story.

In 2016, at the age of 56, I discovered the Authentic Relating and Circling movement, through the now-defunct Integral Center in Boulder, Colorado. This occurred after a lifetime of seeking, of throwing myself head-first into every type of psychotherapy, religion, self-help psychology, Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT), New Religious Movement (NRM) and Intentional Community (IC) that I could find and which my resources allowed. I call this "*the 40-year war against myself and against the world, trying to make a buck and get a little love, mostly unsuccessfully*", because I experienced many more failures than successes in those 40 years. In 2016 I was not a happy person, and I was a far greater dick even than I am today, which is no small statement. Let's be blunt: I was desperate.

It became immediately apparent to me that what was happening then in Boulder, and around the world in a number of places (San Francisco, Austin TX, New York City, Amsterdam etc.) was historically significant, the emergence of a developmental practice and community (what I call "*an experimental community of love in action*") which was powerful and profound. What made the movement even more compelling, is that it was, for the most part, open-source (i.e. not a proprietary or trademarked brand, or controlled from the top), relatively inexpensive, and widely available including online (online Circling works *exceedingly* well).

It was also, at times, a shit-show, as you would expect. You cannot live in the light, until you have experienced the darkness in yourself, and realize that the purpose of relationship is to mirror you in both your light and your darkness. I was looking for a developmental practice that understood this, that understood that "*we discover ourselves through the eyes of others*". Circling is also sometimes referred to as a "relational meditation"; and as many important teachers have realized (Patricia Albere, Carter Phipps, Arjuna Ardagh, and others) the classical forms of enlightenment are too slow, maybe even out of date. Our solo-meditation

in our mountain retreat may no longer satisfy. Plus, given the state of the world, we don't have time for that anymore (if we ever did). Circling looked to me as the ticket.

I launched myself into the movement with the intensity and ferocity of a man who was drowning. Through late 2016 and all of 2017 I circled online every day, sometimes twice a day (on the CircleAnywhere platform, which remains the largest, and arguably still the best, online Circling platform). I also, in a bold move, started my own group: I invited some friends to a weekly circle, and led it. It ran for a year and it was phenomenal, which I attribute more to my good taste in choosing my friends than to my skill (I was still pretty "green" in Authentic Relating, despite my prior 30 years of psychological work). This is a practice that I have continued: I am in a weekly men's group that I formed 4 years ago, with many of the original people, and it continues to deepen. This by the way is the highest-leverage action step that you can take from reading this book: *invite your friends, or business associates, into a weekly Authentic Relating circle*. This book will tell you how to do that, and make it fun and transformational for everyone.

In late 2017, in yet another bold move that generated considerable push-back from the community, I wrote the Circling Guide (in terms of "push-back", recall what I said earlier "shit-show", or to quote Sara Ness "*in the movement we fight like family*"). The Circling Guide was in the end well-received with excellent reviews, became the most popular book on the Circling practice, and made me a very minor celebrity in the A/R movement; but it did not have the impact or reach that I had hoped for within the movement, let alone in the wider world. In all fairness, I have to say that you cannot learn Circling from a book, you have to practice. I did not learn Circling from a book. I kept going however, muddled through life for 4 more years, kept learning and growing, had some great successes in leadership and equally great failures ("*recovering asshole*" became my trademark), and published a significant update to the Circling Guide in February 2021. That project is now complete and no updates are planned, at least for a while.

This book came from a desire to write something with a larger scope and which would be of interest to people outside of the A/R movement. What follows here is the "new story", the one that is not included in the Circling Guide.

From the fall of 2021 to now

In the spring of that same year, 2021, I moved to a commune in Wyoming which turned out to be a left-wing political cult, but they utterly

transformed my life. Especially starting in the fall of 2021 when I joined the [Level Up](#) (which is CircleAnywhere's high-level Circling training program, and one of the best such offers in the world), almost exactly a year ago as I write this, began the most extraordinary year of my life. A whole series of events occurred, some related to the commune (they heavily traumatized me, time after time, and I for sure inflicted my share of trauma on them), some events related to the Level Up, and others pure serendipity. After nearly a decade of my "journey through the wilderness", of losing in almost everything that I tried – that story partially told in my third book, the memoir [Broke, Single, Crazy and Old: The Redemption of a Sex and Love Addict](#), published in May of 2022 – after close to 10 years of back-to-back business and relational failures, I started winning everywhere: in business, in money, in relationship and community-building, in A/R leadership, in lifestyle upgrades and in new adventures. I could not understand what had happened, but I could not deny the reality of it. The loneliness of living in the commune was intense and unrelenting, but I could not deny the transformation. I started referring to it (no doubt grandiosely) as "*intense karmic flow*" or "*transformation at the speed of light*".

Fundamentally, it was my experience of living in this dysfunctional commune – along with other engagements such as the Level Up and serendipitous events, I cannot establish causality here – but it was the experience of living in the commune that transformed me. Maybe I would have transformed anyway, maybe the commune had nothing to do with it. But I don't think so. Those radical-queer communists and anarchists gave me my life.

The essence of that transformation was the two take-aways which are central to this book: first, *Trauma is good for you*; and second, *Own Your Characterology*. I also got clear on the dynamics of cult psychology, which I realized is the fundamental problem of the modern world (both 20th and 21st centuries) and which most people are unconscious of. It is quite difficult to have any kind of lasting positive impact on the world, until you realize that almost all of us are either unconscious victims of cult psychology, perpetrators, or both. More about this in chapter xxx. Just to say for now: **you can't do anything about cult psychology until you become aware of it; and to become aware of it you must acquire relational intelligence.** And I believe that the go-to practice ("*the living laboratory of love*") for the acquisition of relational intelligence is Circling within the Authentic Relating tradition.

Note that I am NOT saying – although part of me wants to, the cultish part – that Circling within the Authentic Relating tradition is the one, essential practice. The "*One True Religion*", as I joke (that's from Hernán Cortés and the joke's on me, which I don't mind). If I said that Circling is

the *essential* practice to the acquisition of relational intelligence, it would be so obvious that I am perpetrating cult psychology that you would put this book down immediately (unless you happened to already be inside the cult). It would also be wrong, as Circling sits within a large family of teachings and practices which can be referred to collectively as “we-space”, many of them being older than Circling (to name just a few, Teilhard de Chardin, Collective Presencing and Non-Violent Communication. There is an annotated list of these in Chapter xxx).

I *will* say however – at the risk of being cultish – that I view Circling as one of the most powerful, the most popular, and the most accessible of these practices. Between all the different A/R organizations, there are at least 20 online groups daily, and probably many more on the ground. Some of them are even free, or donation. Non-Violent Communication is maybe five or ten times more popular than Circling. So try out NVC if it feels right. But if you want to do Circling within the Authentic Relating tradition, there are, practically-speaking, unlimited opportunities.

Oof, it is said. I will own that as my bias. Don’t believe anything I say here. But if I failed to say it, I would be out of integrity with myself.

Case study: Own your characterology (heads-up, this is going to be brutal)

[Editor’s note: shaded text in this book indicates an example or a case-study]

I don’t want this introduction to be merely a lecture, or a persuasion / enrollment piece designed to have you buy this book. I want to “walk my talk” (or, as they say at Microsoft, “*eat my own dog-food*”). Let me do a live demonstration here of “*own your characterology*” (also known as “*own your psycho-pathology*”).

I fit within the bioenergetic character structure called *schizoid* (no relationship to being schizophrenic, this is from Alexander Lowen who was a student of Wilhelm Reich. His book Depression and the Body is one of the best I have ever read). I am also a dyed-in-the-wool Enneagram type 4, neuro-diverse, Bipolar II, mental-health challenged, Asperger’s (which is a form of Autism), and sexual deviant (hard-core dom). Let me start by unpacking “schizoid”. My fundamental fear, the thing that drives much of my behavior, is that I am unworthy of attention, of being loved, that I don’t even deserve to be alive. I disconnect from the body, my feeling center, and move into the head, because connecting to my feeling center would be too painful. In the head I can stay alive, I can pretend that I am better than other people. And by the way, my birth family was not even abusive, this is just genetics and everyday/ordinary

cultural trauma (or ancestral trauma) that made me like this. I discuss developmental and ancestral trauma in chapter xxx.

I compensate with a ferocious desire to prove to the world that I am worthy of love and attention. When I *don't* get the love, attention, or understanding that I want, or even when people don't show up for me in the way that I want, I tend to become angry and/or aggressive. My bipolarity is a factor in this too, it can make me irritable and impatient. This happens quite frequently, dare I say most of the time: that I don't get the attention and understanding that I want – I am, after all, a neuro-diverse crazy fuck, something of a dick, and not much to look at.

This difficulty that I have of meeting my contact needs (refer to the next paragraph on my Enneagram 4) makes life intensely lonely for me, as a general rule. It also puts me into a daily, maybe hourly, pitched-battle with the world in which I am trying to get them to love me and affirm me. What is funny here as well (tragi-comic) is that the more they reject me and misunderstand me (or else don't show up for me), the more I hammer on them, the more I try and prove them wrong: prove to them that I am actually a fucking genius and that they SHOULD pay attention to me. I mean: *I am an Authentic Relating leader! I have written the most popular book on the Circling practice!* And so on. Needless to say, this has never worked, and sometimes I even end-up re-traumatizing *them*, which doesn't help at all.

This dynamic is actually fairly common, by the way: many of us give 90% of our attention to the people who *don't* like us and don't get us, rather than investing time in cultivating relationships with people who DO like us and get us. What I am describing is a typical human pattern.

On to “Enneagram 4”. I am, paradoxically given my schizoid-ness and my autism, a classic Enneagram 4 (the “artist”, “individualist” or “misunderstood genius” type). What this means (among other things) is that I am fascinated by my inner emotional experience, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else – notably, other people's feelings and needs. My autism caused me to start life with a major relational handicap, I was simply unbelievably clueless when I began. This is why it took me 30 years in the human potential movement (prior to my discovery of Authentic Relating) to even begin to get base-level competency in the art of feeling and emotional communication. But I am also (remember: NO bad characterologies) very persistent and in many ways quite resilient. “*Get up off the floor and try again*” is my motto. This is what I did, and ultimately succeeded. It just took 40 years.

In any case, this combination of my Enneagram 4 and my autism creates an unusual situation. It creates a deep hunger for connection, a compelling and maybe obsessive need to be seen in my rich, Enneagram 4 inner world, and a desire to see and witness others in their inner worlds. I crave “*the meeting of hearts and minds*” and I also crave sexual intimacy – skills with which I began my adult life virtually retarded. And yet it is those factors that ultimately caused me to develop into the person I am today: a pretty good writer [shyly blushing] and an adequate relational leader. On a good day I am even brilliant. I am especially good at vulnerability, which ultimately derives from the fact that I don’t care what people think about me, an aspect of my autism.

It starts with self-knowledge

“Owning your characterology” is the same as self-knowledge. Specifically, the kind of deep self-knowledge that you can *only* get from deep mirroring by other people, and through “*the school of hard knocks*”. Reading books, including this one, won’t do it. Meditating won’t do it, if that is all you do. Becoming successful in business and making a lot of money won’t do it. Participating in Ayahuasca ceremonies won’t do it. Without self-knowledge it’s not possible to be an effective friend, parent, or lover. Without true self-knowledge, which includes self-acceptance and self-compassion, you still *may* (if you are lucky) become successful, but you won’t be happy.

We get self-knowledge and learn compassion from other people, for the most part. I say “for the most part” because this is not strictly true, meaning that any and all circumstances in our lives – especially the hard ones – teach us who we are. However, most people have it all wrong where “development” is concerned. They believe that becoming successful, accomplished, or spiritually awakened will bring them happiness and relational wealth.

The truth is the opposite. Success, wisdom, and spiritual depth usually come automatically from emotional development (also known as relational intelligence or emotional EQ). Other people are, and always have been, our greatest teachers. Learn how to get along with them – especially the assholes of the world, of which you may be one – and they will teach you. Furthermore, emotional development is fairly easily measured: *most people will like you and want to hang-out with you.* You will have as many quality friends and lovers as you want, or can handle. Your “popularity” is not a 100% accurate metric of Emotional EQ, because other areas are important such as the quality of your internal dialogue and the depth of those connections; but how well you show up for people and how they respond to you is still a valuable measure, which makes the job

of increasing your relational intelligence easier (because you will get immediate feedback). Other areas of development, such as spiritual power and maturity, are much more difficult or even impossible to measure. Financial wealth has no correlation at all with emotional development, and may even have a negative correlation.

Until you know who you are, your secret / unconscious motivations, what you can and cannot bring to the table in business, in relationship, in parenting, in community, in sex, you will NOT have access to authentic happiness and power, because you will not be able to fulfill yours and others fundamental human needs (more about the fundamental human needs in the following chapters). Without this self-knowledge, your journey to happiness and power will be a bumpy ride, at best.

But this is true for everyone. There is good news and bad news here.

The bad news is that it is very probable you will be dealing with the same fundamental characterology issues and unconsciousness around them your whole life.

The world will continue to hammer you, to mirror back to you your development gaps, your unconsciousness, arrogance, laziness and stupidity. You will probably never be completely finished with your humbling. I like to quote Richard Rohr on this: *“I pray for a daily humiliation. Doesn’t have to be a big one”*. LOL

The good news – dare I say, the incredible news – is that there will come a point where this will start to become fun. Your numbers will, as they say in business, *“move out of the red and into the black”*. There will come a point where you will move through your own developmental trauma so quickly that you will laugh at the complete idiot that you were 5 minutes ago, at all the shit-stories you made up about so-and-so which turned out to have no reality whatsoever; and you will shake your head in awe and disbelief at the even greater idiot (*or wimp, or door-mat, or lazy, complacent or willfully blind*) person that you were one year ago, or even a few short months ago – before you realized the true state of affairs in this situation that had you down and hopeless for so long, and took the obvious (in retrospect) action. You will begin to experience for yourself *“transformation at the speed of light”*. You will naturally, inevitably and without even trying, just because you want to, become a purveyor of the thing that everybody wants (and many want desperately): *authentic connection, love and caring, being seen and understood for who we really are*. Everyone will want a piece of you, which if you think about it, is one of those “good problems to have”.

You will become, in short, a “beginning student” (to quote the Zen master) of the most powerful and valuable skill in the

world: relational intelligence. It is highly probable that this skill will be monetizable by you, but even if not, there is no loss as your happiness will be as assured as any mortal human being can hope for, as you pursue the difficult karmic path which you know you must follow, and which, if you are wise, you know it's of no value to resist.

This is the promise of relational leadership, or relationship intelligence.

Circling is not enough; and other words of advice

I will begin with a disclaimer: I am a relatively beginning student of relational leadership. I have no degrees in the field (they don't exist, anyway) and I have not started any relational companies (well, I do have a very small one). I have worked very long and hard to get to where I am, I have suffered much – although probably no more than the average – but this does not make me an expert. Except, perhaps, an expert on relational stupidity, which oddly, is not a bad qualification for this job. Many of my relationships are greatly challenged, such as with my birth family currently.

I have, however, been “around the block a few times” in the movement and in my personal practice, and have experienced a great deal of success. And so here in the advice part: *what you will need to do is Circling within the Authentic Relating tradition* (or else find some comparable we-space practice or community). And then take that out into the world, practice “Authentic relating on the street”. But don't stop there. If you can afford it, by all means find a therapist or a group which can support your work in depth psychology (for instance, the Shalom Mountain community in the Catskills of New York State). Find a sane, psychologically informed religion, or at least a group that resonates (I like Tara Brach and Richard Rohr). Join an intentional community, or better start one.

Circling in formal groups is not enough. In part because action is required in the world (and not just in your groups). In part because we in the movement suffer from our particular kind of blind spots. And in part because as soon as you put all your hope for salvation into a single organization or ideology, and all your energy into trying to enroll your friends in it; or, alternatively, put all your energy into destroying a manifestly evil organization or worldview – *do either of those two things, and you may actually become part of the problem rather than the solution.* This is a gray area because I am not saying that you should not tell your friends things that you are excited about, or fight for social justice, or expose cults. I am saying: *do it with love, at least as much as*

you can muster. Don't imagine that you are right and "they" are wrong. Don't imagine that your desire to stick-it-to-them comes from anything other than your own unconsciousness and projections. "*Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*" (To understand everything, is to forgive everything). Or even (my favorite), "*when we are angry, killing people is too superficial*" [Marshall Rosenberg]. Marshall is referring here to the problem of cult psychology, the fundamental problem of the modern world, a problem which is caused ultimately by a lack of relational intelligence and a lack of courage. I devote all of Chapter xxx to this problem and to effective ways of dealing with it.

Moving forward: how to read this book

This book suffers from my own perspectival limitations. I will make it better as the years go on (subsequent editions) but the book will never entirely escape my perspectival limitations. This book will go through many editions and upgrades, as I understand more about and gain empathy about other people's characterologies and how these characterologies interact with the world.

And yet, I would like to believe that the fundamental model and patterns that I will be describing, have universal validity. Decide for yourself if you agree; and if you don't, let my ideas clarify and enlighten how *you* see things differently, how *you* want to live your life differently than the way I do. I celebrate you in that, my brother or sister.

In full disclosure – I was afraid of leading with this, but now that you have read this far I can say it – this book is both a practical "how-to" manual into the higher levels of Authentic Relating (what I left out of the Circling Guide) *and* a cosmology, or a world-view. I hope you will find the cosmology interesting and that it will inform your practice. But if not, dump the cosmology and just do the practice. The practice is how you can win in relationships. How you can make people want to be your friend and desire to hang out with you, while being authentically you. How you can really show-up for other people in a way that changes lives. How you can inject a little love into this sad, sorry world, and stay sane in the face of the madness.

PART 1: THE RELATIONAL WEALTH BLUEPRINT: CIRCLING, AUTHENTIC RELATING AND EFFECTIVE EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION

Part 1 of this book is your “Authentic Relating Bootcamp”

I will be presenting, as concisely as I can, what you need to know both conceptually and practically to engage the movement and the practice. Specifically:

- In the next Chapter 1, I will give you the 30,000 foot view of the model and practices of Circling and Authentic Relating, and some of the history. We’ll talk about “the true joy in life” and how to get there.
- In Chapter 2, we unpack and critique Non-Violent Communication. NVC was, at the time it was created (1970’s) the most powerful relational developmental model ever invented. Even today, it gets far more things right, than it gets wrong. To do Authentic Relating effectively, you *must* understand NVC.
- In Chapter 3 we return to Circling, how it works and why, and the logistics. How to engage and benefit from it.
- Chapter 4 will explain the two fundamental human needs and how you can “be” and communicate in a way that meets these needs in the people around you, leading you to relational wealth. We also cover the masculine and feminine poles of love, how this relates to Circling, the impact of large-scale developmental trauma, and the powerful practice of “withholds”.
- Chapter 5 covers attitudes and communication patterns (including many examples of what to do and say in groups) which you can use to Circle well and have fun with it.

Those five chapters will give you the required foundation to beginning your journey to becoming a competent relational leader. The rest is just practice. Some people will get it immediately, others (like me) will take years or even decades. It’s all good. Don’t judge yourself.

Part 2 describes the cultural context of the work (hint: they won't instantly love you to pieces or hail you as a savior)

It is very important to understand the cultural context of your work in relational leadership, because you cannot expect “instant success” here. Do not imagine that everyone will respond well to your attempts at Authentic Relating (which may be initially clumsy), love you to pieces, or hail you as a savior. Indeed, you will probably get quite intense push-back from certain people, especially your family. I will speak in Chapter xxx about the thorny problem of bringing A/R into your family – if you even want to try, which is ambitious.

The problem of doing “Authentic Relating on the street” is complex. The reasons for this relate to the challenge of being authentic and loving in an emotionally illiterate culture, and the all-pervasiveness of cult psychology. We'll get into this, and what you can do about it, in Part 2 of this book.

Part 3 we return to practical problems in effective emotional communication

In Part 3 we re-visit different aspects and practices for effective relational leadership and emotional communication. We cover other important topics (such as how to deal with your family) which will guide your practice and help you deal with the inevitable difficulties and roadblocks.

Part 3 is essentially the follow-up to Part 1, as (recall) Part 1 is the summary, “Cliff's notes” or what I call “the minimal viable story” you need to know to be effective.

I will be giving you lots of examples of the kinds of personal transformations that happen through this practice. I won't be able to cover all the potential roadblocks on your journey to relational wealth (and from there happiness and power), but hopefully this will be helpful.

Chapter 1: Practical Relational Leadership through the Authentic Relating practice - the 30,000 foot view

“This is the true joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. Being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.” – George Bernard Shaw

“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” – Howard Thurman

The ingredients of the “true joy of life”, and how to find them

This chapter is designed as a summary and orientation to the Circling and Authentic Relating movement, as it has evolved historically and as I understand it. In the next Chapter 2 we’ll cover Non-Violent Communication (or NVC) which is an earlier form of Authentic Relating, and do a compare-and-contrast of A/R and NVC through a practical example or case-study. And finally in Chapter 3 we’ll return to A/R and start to unpack the elements of the practice in a more systematic way.

I will start with my personal relationship to the writing, my intention. This, by the way, is called “context setting”, a topic we’ll return to in Chapter 3; **it means, essentially, naming what is happening in the here-and-now, which includes the intentions and/or desires which create your speech and actions.** Context-setting is an “integral” practice (more about this later) because in it, you are simultaneously aware of what you are saying (the *content*), and of your underlying motives, the feelings and needs which are driving your communications (the *context*). Once you learn how to do this, and do it consistently, it will (at minimum) double the power of your communications. All good leaders know this already, even if they are not trained in A/R.

This book is both the result (the product or artifact) of the sense of rapid transformation, feeling of vitality and aliveness, quality of connection, and success and happiness which started occurring to me in the fall of 2021; AND the curriculum for my 6-week course, which is called Practical

Relational Leadership through Authentic Relating. **My goal in writing is twofold: first to see if my results, the successes I am having, are replicable by others through the model and practices that I am describing; and second to gain partners and allies for the work.**

The desired outcome of the work – the deep relational work – is described very eloquently in George Bernard Shaw’s quote above as “*the true joy of life*”. What Shaw is speaking of, if I understand him correctly, is in finding your “right place” in the world. A place in which you are effective in pursuing your agenda and your joy (maybe even becoming a “force of nature”); but where you are also surrendered and committed to a purpose which includes, but also transcends your personal or individual preferences. Some people call this purpose “God”; but regardless of what you call it, you are still going to need to figure out how to do it.

I see the fundamental action steps of acquiring that “true joy” as a three-step process:

1. Getting clear enough on your identity to know the places and relationships where you can truly serve (along with the places you need to get out of).
2. Finding a community (or movement) of teachers, allies and peers who understand the nature of your work and can train you and support you.
3. And from there, getting out and doing this work (also known as practicing relational leadership in your field). Start your own groups or else lead informally (“on the street”), as described below. Bring your “work” – of education, of personal and social transformation, of pure presence, of artistic or intellectual expression, of enlightenment or healing or embodiment, whatever it is – **bring your work into the world.**

The important thing to be aware of here, is that *you cannot do this work alone*. You need to find teachers, peers and allies, and students or mentees. If you *can’t* find peers or allies you must develop or train them; but the job of developing peers and allies is quite difficult if you are starting from nothing, meaning you are only representing your own ideas. It is *much* easier if you can find an existing movement or community which you are aligned with and which has integrity, and then join it and make it better through your presence. Ideally you will do this for many such communities. Your work may not fit neatly into only one community of interest and practice.

My primary community is Authentic Relating and Circling, which is a near-perfect fit for me (with the qualifier, as already told, that almost all communities are shit-shows in some aspects, through the simple fact that humans haven't yet learned how to get along with each other). I am also very interested in the intentional community movement, in entrepreneurship, in alternative sexuality, and in the mental health, addiction recovery and self-help movements. It was, however, my discovery and final identification with the Authentic Relating movement that initiated the shift that occurred for me in the fall of 2021. I now primarily identify myself as a relational leader within the Authentic Relating and Circling tradition, and I desire to bring that model and practice into all my other relationships and communities.

Your primary movement or identification (in case you already have one) may be different from mine, and if so, I would love for you to fully express that and start leading there. I have chosen Authentic Relating and Circling as it checks all the boxes for me: I think of it as (arguably) one of the most powerful human transformational modalities ever invented; it's open-source and mostly low-cost; it's usually super-fun; and it can be integrated with spectacular results into most any relationship, community, social or political movement, religion or spirituality, developmental model or self-help practice.

Furthermore, from my perspective A/R is like “the source”, or overarching context of all effective personal, social, and political developmental work: because **if you can't get along with people (despite your great ideas or high level of spiritual attainment) you probably won't get very far in the world; whereas if you become a person whom people like and respect and want to hangout with, the scale and scope of what you can accomplish is practically unlimited.** How to become that person is the essence of this book. *Hint:* it's much more about how you show up for *them* rather than any special knowledge or skills you bring to the table. “*No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care*” – Theodore Roosevelt.

What you do once you have gained the fundamental skill of relational leadership is your business, and I hope you will use it well. I like A/R because I consider it the “missing link” in 95% of other transformational cultures and modalities, even many of the relational ones like Non-Violent Communication, or NVC. **There is virtually no other community or culture which can't be improved through your personal practice of relational leadership inside that culture.** And in many, or even most cases, the *lack* of relational leadership is the cause of the stumbling or even failure of these cultures and communities.

Authentic Relating compared to other transformational modalities

There are, of course, a large number of other transformational modalities, developmental philosophies, therapy schools, religions and communities, etc. Quite a few of these are also inherently relational in their approach (I call the relationally-focused modalities “we-space”. More about this later). But even among the more relational schools, most (not all) miss the mark in at least one of the following:

1. They are not open-source (meaning they are a for-profit brand controlled from the top).
2. They are too expensive.
3. They require a licensed provider, meaning they don’t work peer-to-peer.
4. Or, they don’t have a global reach.

NVC also checks all of those boxes, **but A/R is like NVC on steroids**. At least when it’s done right. NVC *does* understand the fundamental context of what it means to be in relationship, and how to show up powerfully for other people; but it also misses a lot. I say more about this below, and also in the next chapter.

Note that I have nothing against for-profit or controlled-brand transformational modalities, including Large Group Awareness Training organizations (LGAT’s) like Landmark Worldwide, therapy modalities like Ann Weiser Cornell’s Inner Relationship Focusing, Christian Pankhurst’s HeartIQ, Peter Levine’s Somatic Experiencing, NARM, etc. (these are all highly recommended modalities. There is an annotated list of these at www.circlinguide.com). These organizations help us along, and I am a big fan of Landmark, personally. **It’s just that if we are going to lead the world’s first truly effective “love revolution”, if we really want to effect a lasting “transformation of the quality of life on this planet” [Werner Erhard], this cannot happen through a controlled-brand or for-profit transformational modality.** We need a modality, a way of being that can reach everyone, not just the people who can pay. A way of being that works peer-to-peer and hence is infinitely scalable. A way of being that works even without “shared context”, meaning the person you are relating to doesn’t need to know or understand what you are doing to benefit and enjoy the experience of being with you.

A brief history of Authentic Relating and Circling

Origins in the Bay Area

You can read about the history of Circling and Authentic relating in my Circling Guide (www.circlingguide.com), and on Adam Coult's epic post. You can find both Adam's and my articles by Googling "History of Circling"; they are both pretty good reads if you are interested in the birth of a movement. I won't repeat all that history here, but I do want to explain some things in relation to the history of the movement and how it evolved, and name some of the major players.

Circling began before Authentic Relating, in the year 1998. The practice was "discovered" by two men, Guy Sengstock (who now runs one of the major 3 schools of Circling) and Jerry Candelaria, stoned on LSD in the desert at Burning Man. On returning to San Francisco from Burning Man, they brought the practice into the world through a workshop called "The Arete Experience", which ran for 10 years and then shut-down after Guy burned-out. They also started a free men's group on the beach of San Francisco which became very popular.

In the year 2003 approximately, Guy and Jerry (along with friends / allies that include Alexis Shepperd and some other women) were found by two other men, Decker Cunov and Bryan Bayer. Decker and Bryan were college friends in Missouri, and had independently discovered the Circling practice (or something very similar) even earlier than Guy and Jerry, although they did not call it "Circling" in those days. They had moved to San Francisco and created a community called "Soul2Soul", which became the blueprint for Authentic Relating. When Decker and Bryan found Guy and Jerry, they realized that Circling and Authentic Relating were very similar in concept and practice. They trained with Guy and Jerry and joined the Arete trainings and community.

Not too long after that (2004), Decker and Bryan developed a program targeted to the "Pick-Up Artist" (or PUA) community called the "Authentic Man Program", or AMP. PUA was a movement, which has since been discredited, to teach men how to pick-up women and have sex as quickly as possible. AMP became globally successful through their DVD training series, and was important for turning Circling and Authentic Relating into a worldwide movement in the mid-2000's. Unlike PUA, the AMP program presents a way for men to meet women and create meaningful connections in a way that has integrity and heart. It's also much more effective than PUA techniques (and to note here that PUA was always more effective at bonding men, than it was at creating meaningful

connections with women). Thus it can be said, that AMP was the first practical application of Circling and Authentic Relating principles, into the real-world problem of sexual relationships.

Later (2011), Decker and Bryan moved to Boulder and took over the Boulder Integral Center, which became the second major school of Circling. Boulder Integral shut-down in 2019 and Bryan and Decker moved on to other things. Decker now coaches silicon valley entrepreneurs, so it could be said that entrepreneurship was the second application of Circling “technology” into the real world.

In 2008, two young men from the UK, Sean Wilkinson and John Thompson, who had also independently discovered the practice in 2002 approximately, found Guy and Jerry and trained with them. They brought the practice back to the UK, applied it to their tennis academy (which became the third application of Circling into the real world), and later started the third major school of Circling which is called [Circling Europe](#) and is based in the Netherlands. Circling Europe later split and branched off into the Austin Circling Studio / CircleAnywhere, based in Austin TX. My own school, the aforementioned [Level Up](#) where I received my training, is part of CircleAnywhere.

So, what happened to Authentic Relating?

Authentic Relating was picked-up again by Sara Ness and Jordan Allen, who created the Austin community. Sara started a school called Authentic Revolution and ran it for 10 years very successfully, becoming the #1 school of Authentic Relating. Authentic Revolution shut down in 2022, although the Austin community is still quite active. Another Authentic Relating company started up called [ART International](#) which used to be the #2 school of Authentic Relating, and is now #1 since Authentic Revolution shut down.

There are at least several dozen smaller schools of Authentic Relating and/or Circling, pretty much all of them online with occasional in-person events or retreats, doing great work, but the most important are the three remaining schools of Circling ([CircleAnywhere](#), [Circling Europe](#), and the [Circling Institute](#)), and the one remaining globally significant school of Authentic Relating ([ART International](#)). In addition to this, many cities, especially in North America and Northwestern Europe, have local communities of practice for either Circling, Authentic Relating, or both. Look for them on Meetup.com or on the communities map at www.AuthRev.com .

Where we stand today

Where we stand today is that the movement is just under 25 years old and there are thriving communities in many places, especially in Austin TX, the Bay area, Portland Oregon, Montreal Quebec, London and Amsterdam. There are smaller communities in many cities in the USA, Western Europe and Australia. Authentic Relating has proven itself to be a solid model for building friendship and community. The early history of Circling and Authentic Relating in San Francisco is especially inspiring as a great many friendships and collaborations were created, and large parties happened as well, the so-called “Gratitude parties”. Read Adam Coutt’s history on this, it’s on the web.

Circling variations, and copyright issues around the “Circling” brand

As discussed above, there are 3 primary lineages of Circling, of which two have survived: the [Circling Institute](#) (Guy Sengstock), [Circling Europe](#), and Integral-style circling. Each of those practices are different, and people in those lineages have been arguing about "what is circling" forever and quite passionately. Circling Europe, in particular, got heavy pushback from the Integral folks in the early days. The argument dissolved when the Boulder integral center and their T3 program shut-down, effectively ending integral-style circling, although that tradition is still alive through its students.

“Circling™” is now a registered trademark controlled by the Circling Institute and Circling Europe. The trademark is not enforced at the moment (or very loosely enforced), but most providers have moved away from the "circling" brand as a result of the trademark, branding their work as "relational leadership", “Authentic Relating” or similar. Circleanywhere has rebranded as "Relatefulness".

My take on the situation is that “Circling” is a practice *inside* the larger umbrella group of “Authentic Relating” (Guy Sengstock, the founder of Circling™, appears to agree with this, by the way). “Authentic Relating” will remain forever an open-source brand, according to Decker Cunov who has first-use.

Due to the tension and confusion around the “Circling” brand, and legal issues, I also don’t use “Circling” in any of my groups’ branding. However, **Authentic Relating started as Circling**, so to take “Circling” out of the conversation altogether, simply because of potential confusion around the name, would not be helpful.

The practices of Authentic Relating and Circling

I continue this overview / summary chapter with the actual practices, the reason that they work so well, and why I think of the A/R movement as a unique and powerful emergence in human history. In Chapter 5 we'll refresh some of the basic ideas presented here, and then get more into the nitty-gritty of how to actually work an Authentic Relating practice, both in a formal group and "on the street".

Now, recall that Authentic relating and Circling are two separate lineages which joined together into a single movement. From my perspective there are three fundamental practices: **Circling, Authentic Relating Games**, and what I call "invisible Circling", or just **Authentic Relating**.

Circling (or Authentic Relating *with* shared context)

Circling is a group conversation practice that usually lasts an hour to an hour and a half, and involves 3 to 9 people. It is possible, however, to have it go on for days and to engage as many as 50 people or more. It also works well in pairs. Circling happens in person in many places around the world, or online via Zoom. Both are great. There are also weekend workshops and advanced training programs (including CircleAnywhere's Level Up, Circling Europe's SAS, and Circling Institute's Art of Circling), which often run 6 to 9 months.

Circling within the Authentic Relating tradition distinguishes itself from almost all other "Circle technologies" as follows. **I define "Circling" as any practice of un-withheld, present-moment connection to self and others, particularly when it involves an agreement around "welcome everything", aka "surrender"**. Because of its present-moment focus, Circling is quite similar to encounter-group or T-group, with the exception that in Circling, "stories" are permissible to the extent that stories are actually happening inside all of us in the present moment; and also all Circling carries an explicit focus on "getting each other's worlds". Without that, if the group is only for self-expression or emotional discharge, it's not Circling.

The idea of Circling within the A/R tradition, is, like all good ideas, very simple in theory and infinitely complex in execution: **it's the present-moment awareness and processing of our experience with other people, but with love, or what we call "connection intent"**. This involves taking every experience that comes to us, every reaction we

have towards other people (happy or sad, “good” or “bad”) and responding with love, or care. **I view Circling as a “love bootcamp”, a place where we can be who we are and make mistakes, mistakes which will (hopefully) be held by the leader and the group with kindness and compassion, and from which we will learn and grow.**

Two clarifications here.

First one relating to “responding with love”. This doesn’t mean being “nicey-nice”. When we cheat another human being of our authentic emotional response, whether this response be positive or negative, it does two things: first, it cheats the other person out of information that could be useful to them for their development, and/or the opportunity to feel close to us. **Second and maybe even more significant, it cheats us of our desire to connect to this person:** because as soon as we carry a “withhold” towards someone (more about “withholds” later), it creates a barrier to intimacy. We drop out of our natural desire to connect, love and care for others and go into judgments, “separation thoughts” or other not-helpful ideation or emotional reactions.

Obviously, giving a person negative feedback can be stressful on both the receiving and the sending side. A good portion of this book will be dedicated to this problem, which is thorny. Giving and receiving negative feedback skillfully and with grace is one of the fundamental skills of human relations, and it's not easy.

Circling versus Non-Violent Communication

A second clarification is the difference between Circling and NVC. There is a large overlap between Circling and NVC, the main difference being that Circling is 100% a presence-practice, or in-the-moment revealing and processing of our individual and collective experience; while NVC can include that, but it’s primarily a communication model or didactic approach to human relationships. Circling’s 100% focus on presence is both a strength and a challenge or limitation, as told in the next chapter. I view some of the didactic elements of NVC, its focus on the communication model which is called “OFNR” (which focus is excessive, in my world), as a limitation of NVC.

Given, however, that Circling integrates many of the core elements of the NVC model, even OFNR which is very useful at times, I consider Circling what we call in Integral theory an “include and transcend” of NVC. We get more into Circling and Integral theory in chapter xxx. I will just say for now that Circling fits into the integral model very powerfully and elegantly. Circling may, indeed, be the best way to learn and actually “be”

integral (as opposed to just talking about it, which is what most so-called “integral” people actually do. For background information about this, Google Mark Manson’s incisive critique of the integral movement in “the rise and fall of Ken Wilber”).

Practically speaking – this may not be your experience but I will say it – once you get good at Circling and Authentic Relating you may not want to do anything else, and you may feel bored or “tied-down” or frustrated with NVC, especially in a beginner group. In a higher-level or skilled group, however, you may have a hard-time distinguishing between NVC and Circling. It may look quite similar.

I say all this because NVC has maybe five or ten times the reach of Circling and Authentic Relating. Despite [my opinion] that it's not as powerful and is not fully an integral model. I desire more people to know about Circling and Authentic Relating, and what’s possible there. This is one of my big reasons for writing this book.

Why Circling is so developmental: the “love bootcamp”

But let me return to the main thread here: **once you understand the idea of Circling as a “love bootcamp”, that the goal is essentially transforming every experience into love (or insight, or learning, or connection, or belonging, or understanding, or empathy/appreciation, etc.), you will understand why it's so powerful in real-world scenarios as well: because, quite simply, if you can transform every experience you have in a formal circle into love, then you can, hopefully, do this in the world too.**

The problem here is that it is *much* more difficult to practice Authentic Relating in the world (versus in your groups), for two reasons.

The first reason is that there is more at stake. You can always walk away from a formal circle, and lose nothing other than the learning opportunity, perhaps. But if you walk away from a relationship in the world, or else communicate inappropriately or not-lovingly, or lose your temper, etc., the cost could be enormous: you could lose your job, your housing, or other important relationships. You could even end up isolated and ostracized by people who used to be your friends and allies. You could lose connection with your family (although in some cases this will be a positive thing – more about this later).

And the second reason why practicing Authentic Relating is more difficult in the world than in your groups, is what we call

“lack of shared context”. In a formal group, like in a facilitated circle or an Authentic Relating game evening, “connection intent” is a shared context. Meaning that, you can pretty much assume that the people present are interested in exploring deep connection, and are open to pushing their edges there. In a real-world scenario, and especially in a conflictual situation with a business associate or stranger, you cannot assume this. In your typical real-world scenario, you cannot expect that the emotion of anger, in particular, will be seen as valuable and worth exploring in an intimate or vulnerable container. Or any other emotion either: *affection, lust, fear, tenderness, loneliness, etc.* **In a real-world scenario, you may feel your very *humanity* so limited and boxed-in that you are left with only two options: collapse or explode in anger. Neither of these are winning options.**

It is *almost always* possible, in any situation, to communicate in a way that increases depth, understanding, and connection (I find Lisa’s story in Chapter 5, section 7 especially inspiring). But it is *much* more difficult in a situation in which “shared context” is lacking, and/or basic ignorance of emotional literacy, which is the default situation in the “real world”.

This problem, of how to respond lovingly and authentically in an emotionally illiterate culture, is the topic of this book. Keep on reading, and maybe we can figure this out, together. For now, simply consider the possibility that almost everyone experiences this problem, and yet almost nobody speaks about it. That you are not alone.

What makes Authentic Relating so powerful

I continue the previous section, of why it is so challenging to be present and loving in an emotionally illiterate culture, a culture that is preoccupied and obsessed with performance and achievement, rather than connection and well-being. A culture so ridden with [mostly unconscious] developmental trauma, and dominated by cult psychology. A shame-based culture which is fundamentally and tragically disconnected and ignorant of the fundamental human needs of *belonging* and *impact/contribution*.

This is a problem that is only solvable through courage and vulnerability. **You have to model to others how you want them to show up for you. You must “teach only love”.**

“Authentic Relating on the street” is usually not easy. It’s not easy because it will fundamentally challenge your identity and your self-concept (which you are probably quite attached to). It may even awaken all your ghosts of fear, self-loathing, self-victimization and rage, or worse, who will come out and demand to be seen and acknowledged by you, whether you are

ready to receive them or not. If you can do it successfully, however, it will likely be the most rewarding thing you have ever done.

It is a natural human reaction to push away strong emotion of any kind, especially negative or blameful thoughts and emotions, and to respond with judgment and distancing. This is considered normal. As a result, many of us walk around with a lot of anxiety, loneliness and pain that has nowhere to go and which then feeds on itself, creating an even greater feeling of separation from other human beings. Hardly anyone, really, gets the quality of attention that would enable them to shift the painful sense of separation that we all feel sometimes, and that some of us feel all the time. Our interactions with people tend to be quite functional, sometimes even the people closest to us. We tend to put a lot of effort into deeply cloaking our humanity. We are taught that this is the way things are and that we just have to get used to it, and we do our best to put a happy face on it (because we fear that if we didn't, we would feel even more isolated). And our effort to pretend that everything is okay when it really isn't, obviously compounds the problem.

But there is good news here, which is that *we don't have to cloak our humanity*. We can strive for all of our interactions with people to have truth and care in them, which also, ironically, makes us much more effective in all spheres of life.

The idea of Authentic Relating is to respond to people from an assumption that everyone desires, at some level, to love and be loved, to know and be known, to *belong*. The need to belong, to be part of a group who knows us and cares for us, is deeply embedded in the context of being human, for the obvious reason that in the tribal culture from which we came, belonging is life-and-death. The need to belong continues to underlie much of our behavior but is rarely something that people talk about or even admit.

The practice of Authentic Relating is to interact with people with the assumption that they want to belong, to be valued and cared of, and to be acknowledged for their contributions. It is a fairly simple and extraordinarily powerful practice that consists, fundamentally, in leading with vulnerability, which is further described below, and providing quality attention and compassion to people. It is an exercise that can be done with no prior agreement and which is virtually guaranteed to transform all of your relationships.

Authentic Relating Games

Authentic Relating games is the second major practice of the Circling and Authentic Relating movement.

A/R Games are a more structured approach to connection than Circling is. Rather than going into a group and then exploring what's alive in the space in an unstructured way, you are given exercises or "sharing prompts" (so-called "sentence stems") or games to play. The games can be partner-shares, small-group breakouts, or exercises with the whole group. For instance: you may be asked to share how you are feeling in the moment with respect to the group, or something that you are afraid of saying, or a story you have about yourself that you want to change. One of my favorite games is called "Next", in which you go around in a circle telling your neighbor something that you wish people would say to you (for instance, "*you are so sexy!*", or whatever).

A/R games are sometimes scary but also often super-fun, because generally in the world we don't have permission to vulnerably communicate our internal experience, and/or we are too scared to do so. The A/R Game format solves this problem, essentially, as it gives us permission (although not an obligation) to share ourselves more openly.

Beyond sentence stems and sharing prompts, you can do all kinds of things in an A/R Game. Another favorite of mine is the "hot-seat game" in which someone volunteers to go on the "hot-seat", and people in the group ask that person personal questions guided by their genuine curiosity. The person on the hot-seat can tell the truth, lie or refuse to answer (and doesn't have to say which!); while the person asking the question always responds with a simple "thank you" (i.e. It's not an ordinary conversation, which keeps the attention on the hot-seat person for the duration). This, by the way, solves a very common problem: that in ordinary conversation people often don't listen or truly relate, they are just waiting for a prompt or excuse to come in with their own story. "Hot-seats" is a very simple but powerful game. And there are many more.

This is another example of the usefulness of "shared context": imagine how many deep personal questions you would ask people in your world, maybe even people you had just met, if you both carried the shared context that your question came out of a desire to know them better and be their friend, and that it would be perfectly okay for them to tell you that they don't feel comfortable sharing that in the moment? Every question would deepen the intimacy, because the person you are asking the question would probably appreciate your interest and curiosity, even if they did not feel like answering, at least immediately.

“Invisible Circling”, or Authentic Relating *without* shared context

“Invisible Circling” is like Circling people without telling them that you are Circling them. You are being and communicating out of a desire to know them, understand them and be close to them, or have fun with them, but you are not stating this intention directly. You are just doing it. **I call this practice simply “Authentic Relating”** (as distinguished from the formal practice of Authentic Relating games, or the formal practice of Circling). **Or, equivalently, “Authentic Relating on the street”.**

While some people might consider “Authentic Relating on the street” manipulative or unethical, I don’t. I do not consider it ethically necessary to tell a person, especially a person whom I have just met, that I want to understand them and feel close to them and maybe want to be their friend. I do sometimes tell them that I am interested and curious about them. This is called an “appreciation”, by the way. Appreciations are the single most powerful tool of Authentic Relating and relatively low-risk, which is why I dedicate most of chapter xxx to this topic.

You must, however, adapt your communications to the person’s receptivity. If you ask them a question and they either deflect it or look embarrassed or even angry, you can either drop it and change the topic, or else you can ask them directly how they felt about the question, give empathy, or apologize for making them feel uncomfortable. The only thing you could do here that might be potentially unethical (or not-connecting) would be to continue probing even after they have told you directly or indirectly that they don’t want to go there with you.

But for the rest, *you are human and therefore you are curious*. Your curiosity is nothing for you to feel badly about or make yourself wrong. You just have to be skillful (or tactful) in expressing your curiosity. It would also be unskillful to judge a person or make them wrong for their unwillingness to answer a sensitive question.

Authentic Relating on the street is truly where the “rubber hits the road” in deep connection practice. It is the ultimate goal of all the training that you do in your Circling groups. Not everyone in the movement agrees with me on this one (it is not “shared context” within the movement), but I suspect 80-90% of practitioners do agree. Remember also that Authentic Relating on the street is *much* more challenging than Circling in your groups or doing Authentic Relating games. I have already shared the reason for this, it’s the “lack of shared context”.

This idea of Circling as a love-bootcamp, a training ground for practicing Authentic Relating in the real world and as a powerful tool for personal, social and political transformation, is not something that is generally presented and taught at Circling workshops and classes, and there are reasons for this which I share below. **But for me this idea is key, absolutely fundamental. Without this idea, Circling loses most of its power.** At best you will find a group of people that you feel “in-sync” with and communicate important things to, things which you would not have the courage to say to anyone else in your life. You will have a good time (at best) a few hours a week with these people, and then you will go home to your lonely flat or dysfunctional marriage or family or community and say nothing. This is not a bad thing – you will at least have a few hours a week of real connection, and will learn something – but it's also kind of missing the point, from my perspective.

If you join a circle *without*, at minimum, what I call “*the tender fragile hopefulness*” of doing something “real” with it, something that could have a profound impact on yourself and your environment, you are missing the boat. I know this perspective may sound, to some, harsh or extreme, and it may be wrong for some people. For some people, just showing up in a circle is huge.

However, if you truly want to be happy (“*the true joy in life*”) you have to make a positive contribution to your environment, and you must join with other people who are doing the same. And remember as well, that Circling in your groups is not enough for you to become a competent relational leader. You have to practice on the street. You become competent in emotional communication by practicing without “shared context” and with people from all walks of life. Some of these people may find the idea of Authentic Relating, or else your desire to do it, completely ridiculous, which is why you won't explain it to them upfront. You will just do it, see how they respond, and then adapt to them. **It's actually 90% probable that they will respond positively; and when they don't, you (and maybe them) will learn something. If this is true, your decision to practice Authentic Relating with the people in your environment ought to be a no-brainer.**

But back to the reasons that the idea of Circling as a “love bootcamp” is not usually taught in beginner circles or Circling workshops. The main reason is that Circling and A/R practices are very difficult to describe, and beginners may not be able to understand it conceptually prior to having the experience. As a Circling and A/R leader, to open a beginner circle or training circle with the idea that this is a practice that has the capacity to change not just their lives, but the world as we know it, may sound inflated or arrogant. Even if it's true, it may not be helpful to say it. It won't necessarily help your students to learn the practice, and to begin a

discussion of Circling as a powerful movement for social and political transformation, may even take your students out of the moment or into heady conversations, which is the opposite of what you want as a Circling leader.

Even so, I am personally on the fence about the failure in many schools to name Circling as a love bootcamp. I wish that more training circles spoke to the power of Circling to change the world as we know it. In my own groups I say this upfront, immediately. And nobody has ever complained.

Moving forward: Non-Violent Communication

Because Circling inherits many of the concepts and practices of the earlier model of NVC, I devote the next chapter to how NVC works. I hope, as well, that the detailed case-study presented in the next chapter will inform your practice of Authentic Relating. If you are like me, you learn through examples and experience more than concepts.

Chapter 2: NVC and Circling, how they complement each other; Learning the language of feelings and needs

“Every criticism, judgment, diagnosis, and expression of anger is the tragic expression of an unmet need.” -- Marshall B. Rosenberg

Introduction to emotional communication, both inside and outside the NVC model

I will start my chapter on Non-Violent Communication with the disclaimer that I apologize if anything I say here comes across as ignorant or judgmental to a person who knows more than me. NVC has its critics, and I am one, although I also really appreciate the model which has helped me a lot.

For instance: Marshall’s quote above sounds “cultish” to me. Not *every* judgment or expression of anger is a tragic expression of an unmet need; just most of them. Expressing anger in the right setting can be helpful, I say more about this below. My biggest criticism of NVC is actually the wholesale and undiscerning forcing of all your communications into the so-called “OFNR” model (Observation - Feeling - Need - Request). Maybe this is just beginner-NVC, I don’t know. In any case, I will explain the model below, demonstrate why it is not always optimal, and show you how you can do better by adding Authentic Relating (A/R).

Others criticize NVC for (allegedly) speaking mostly to people of privilege, for not addressing the problem of systemic oppression, and for not understanding inter-subjective reality (meaning that our communications are not just words, they are *energy*). More about inter-subjective reality below in this chapter, and also later in this book. It’s an extremely important topic within A/R and Circling.

Here is a good example of NVC’s failure to acknowledge the inter-subjective space: the statement “*you make me feel guilty*”. Technically this is not correct (nobody can *make* you feel anything), and it’s certainly not an OFNR-approved way of speaking. However this statement is, from my perspective, clear, concise and inarguable. The statement will most likely land quite powerfully in an inter-subjective (or emotionally intelligent) space. Even if you disagree, the only intelligent response you can make is “*Really??? How do I make you feel guilty?*”, which will deepen the conversation either way. If I tried to fit that statement into OFNR, it would be five times longer and would probably not

communicate any better. Communications need to be as concise and tight as possible, especially when there is emotional charge present. More about emotional charge in Chapter 4.

In all fairness, Marshall started his work on NVC in the 70's. There *were* inter-subjective teachings and communities present then (“we-space”) but they were not as developed as they are now, and it's probable that Marshall did not engage. The world has evolved considerably since then.

And yet in spite of its limitations, understanding and practicing good NVC is very valuable, and maybe essential, to Circling effectively. The most important contributions of NVC are in learning the language of feelings and needs, the OFNR model, and the powerful idea of “needs as a gift”, which I also say more about below.

NVC actually IS, from my perspective, a “complete relational developmental system”. It *does* understand the fundamental truths of what it means to be in relationship, and the challenges likely to arise. In the higher-level teachings of NVC, you learn a concept called “NVC Consciousness”. NVC consciousness is essentially the same as “Circling consciousness”: it is your attempt to fulfill the human needs of everyone around you, especially related to connection, belonging, appreciation and impact/contribution. From this perspective, the root goals of NVC and Circling are identical.

The upside, or potential of NVC is the same as the upside of Circling: by communicating and “being” in a way that fulfills yours and others fundamental human needs, you will access happiness and power more quickly and easily.

The downside or risk of NVC is that you will take it on as a cult, attempt to force all your communications into OFNR, and sound like an idiot to all your friends and business associates; or, at minimum, generate a lot of eye-rolling. I refer to such people as “NVC robots”.

The downside or risk of Circling is that you will enter it without emotional literacy or understanding of feeling and needs, and hence not make optimal use of it. Another downside of Circling is that, unlike NVC, we typically “throw you into the deep end” without any education, at the risk of re-traumatizing you in the first three sessions, and you never coming back. Although frankly, you can be re-traumatized in NVC almost as easily. What we call “developmental trauma” is a fundamentally important topic which we will return to in the following chapters.

Let's move on now to what NVC does well, and how you can make it much better by adding Authentic Relating (A/R).

Case study: the OFNR model, and compare-and-contrast NVC and Authentic Relating

The OFNR model (4-part formula of NVC) goes like this:

[1] Observation, [2] Feelings, [3] Needs, [4] Requests

I will illustrate with the classical and easily relatable problem of your housemate not doing the dishes. This is a simple problem, on the surface; but it can be unpacked at any level of complexity. Such, by the way, is the nature of human relationships, and what makes them both so challenging and so fun.

Your communication might go like this:

Matthew, [1-Observation] I noticed you did not do the dishes last night. [2-Feeling] I felt a bit confused about this, because we have spoken about this before and I thought we had an agreement. [3-Need] I really do have a need for order and cleanliness in the kitchen. [4-Request] Do you suppose that you could do your dishes after eating?

Now, there is nothing wrong with this communication, per se. It's certainly much better than:

[Accuse him and make him wrong for his behavior] Matthew, what the hell is wrong with you? [Blame him for your feelings] We have spoken so many times about this and you continue to disappoint me. [Threaten him with unspecified action] Are you going to start fulfilling your obligations in this house or not?

This is called in NVC “Jackal language” as opposed to “Giraffe language”, which is the correct use of NVC. Sad to say, that Jackal language is much more common than Giraffe language.

I am sure you will agree that the first version is much more likely to lead to the desired outcome - that Matthew do his dishes without having to be reminded.

But from an A/R perspective, the first communication is not ideal. Here is what I would say, the “correct” (or at least “more correct”) A/R communication:

[Vulnerable share and request permission for a clearing conversation] Matthew, I am feeling a bit upset about something and I wonder if I can talk to you? Is now a good time?]. [After permission given: more vulnerability] I am actually really afraid of bringing this up with you, but [Observation and yet more vulnerability] I was disturbed (or negatively impacted) when I came into the kitchen this morning and saw your dishes, especially as we have talked about this before. [Offer empathy,

open up a dialogue] Is it hard for you to do your dishes at night? Is there something going on with you right now? I am here to listen, if it would help. [And stop there! It's too early in the conversation to express a need or make a request, you are in early stages of connection. Give Matthew a little space]

Let me ask you: if you were Matthew, which communication would you prefer, the first or the last one? Which one would get you more motivated to do your dishes, which statement would make you feel closer to me, and why? Pause your reading for a moment, and think about this.

Here are the reasons that I imagine Matthew would prefer the last communication:

(Note: There is perhaps a better NVC communication that I, in my ignorance, am not able to frame. Please read this as a case study in emotional communication, more than as a critique of NVC, exactly).

1. In the first (NVC style) of communication, I am bringing to Matthew my “emotional charge”, my anger and upset and desire (and maybe even demand) that he show up in a way that is different from what he is doing now (different attitude, different behavior or different communication). It is both courteous and smart to ask him first whether he is open to a clearing conversation, given the high likelihood that he could be triggered by this. You would probably do this in NVC as well (ask for permission prior to launching into a clearing conversation), but in A/R you should *always* ask for permission prior to a conversation on a sensitive topic.

A simple formula here is to express fear or ambivalence prior to beginning (“*I am afraid of bringing this up*”). This potentially puts the other person on your side from the get-go, as you are indirectly asking for empathy. In this example, I am owning this as my problem too, the fact that I am fearful, which gives Matthew an opportunity to help me resolve that fear and return to a place of mutual love and caring.

2. Notice as well my offer of empathy in the A/R communication. You would do this in good NVC as well, of course; but in initiating a clearing conversation you should *always* offer empathy, whether you are doing NVC or whether you are doing A/R. If I *don't* offer empathy, I am essentially forcing or funneling Matthew into my communication structure.

Look again at the first communication. What are Matthew's

possible responses? “Yes” or “No”. Along with variations that would include “*Yea, sorry dude, I had a rough day yesterday, will try and do better*”, or else “*No, I am not willing to agree to that. Yesterday I was a fucking mess and I just did not feel like doing the dishes. Let me calm down and talk to you later, as I am too angry right now at your NVC-robot communications. I am actually feeling your style of communication to be dehumanizing*”. Matthew would actually be perfectly correct in saying that, if that is how he was feeling. Note here, that very few people would have the emotional literacy or the courage to actually say this. But Matthew may feel it, regardless of whether he actually says it.

3. Notice in the A/R communication no less than *three* vulnerable shares (“upset”, “afraid”, “disturbed”). As opposed to only *one* in the NVC statement (“confused”). “Confused” is an *excellent* way to share vulnerability when you are engaging a difficult conversation (you don’t want to trigger your partner from the get-go), *however it is not a high-level of vulnerability*. The truth of the matter is that I am feeling angry and disappointed. But I can’t say this in NVC because in NVC, anger and disappointment are not “pure” emotions, they are the result of a judgment coming from an unmet need. We unpack this a bit more below.

My point is that I may think I am giving a perfect communication, I may be so pleased with myself, *but the truth is that I am a withholding bitch*. In the first communication, I am not really putting myself on the line or risking anything. I am not modeling what I actually want, which is Matthew’s openness, trust and vulnerability.

4. It is *WAY* too soon in this exchange to express my needs, let alone make a request. In the first, NVC-correct communication, Matthew may well be thinking, and would even be justified in speaking some version of this: “*Dude, could you please chill out? [subtext: you OCD prick]. I hear your need, but I had a terrible day at work yesterday and I had a need to watch TV after dinner and to do the dishes in the morning while listening to heavy metal on my walkman*”. Bear in mind that at this stage, Matthew may not care about my needs. This, incidentally, is a wise perspective for you to take on in all your relationships: **assume that nobody cares about your needs, until proven otherwise**. Especially when your immediate need is that they show up differently than

how they are currently being.

5. Finally: this is important and actually very deep. If I were doing true “NVC consciousness” I would include in my OFNR (or at minimum try and communicate this non-verbally) the statement “*I care for you and I have a desire to feel close to you*”; but it would be awkward, because to be in full integrity I would have to say that in *all* my OFNR communications.

Here is my point: my deepest desire is NOT that Matthew do his dishes 365 days a year, or that my need for cleanliness and order be met. **My deepest desire is (probably) that he feel close to me and me to him, that we enjoy and trust each other, and that we have an open communication channel so that I can tell him when I am upset by his behavior and he won't be triggered.**

This is certainly true in the case that I am already, or want to be, his friend. In the case that I *don't* want to be friends with him, that I am simply seeking a cordial but distant roommate relationship, *I still don't want him to hate me*. I don't want unspoken and unresolved tension in the relationship, because Matthew actually has the power to make my life hell, merely through his non-verbals as I sit peacefully in the kitchen over my morning coffee, reading the newspaper. You know this is true. If Matthew ever gets to that place of hating me, it will be *very* difficult to bring him back.

To summarize my critique of NVC in this imaginary case study, the compare-and-contrast of NVC and A/R: there is a way in which NVC is too simple: the attempt to funnel all your communications into OFNR. And another way in which it is too complicated: the attempt to distinguish and express the 100 or so “approved” feelings and needs within NVC, when in my frame, there are really only two fundamental human needs outside of safety and survival, along with their infinite variations which I will discuss in chapter 4.

What I like about A/R, is that it doesn't pretend to be simple. What I *don't* like about A/R, is that it typically doesn't offer much support in the way of structure (although see www.Authrev.com. Sara Ness, and others too, have put years of work into the attempt to add structure to A/R). To repeat: you will need *both* NVC and A/R.

The difference between a feeling and a judgment / evaluation

This is both one of the most powerful concepts within NVC, and also sometimes taken too far (i.e., cultish).

There are emotions which are somewhere on the edge between a true feeling, and a thought or judgment. The most common of these are anger, shame, guilt, depression and disappointment. In orthodox NVC these emotions are viewed as “emotions that are disconnected from our needs” because they are based on an underlying judgment, or story. Something like “impure emotions” that we ought to work on prior to expressing them. The idea is that we can’t make an effective communication when we are disconnected from our needs. Instead, change the thought or judgment that is creating the anger, or else identify the underlying unmet need. This will shift the anger, or at least make it more manageable. This is both profoundly true, and not-true.

To illustrate this truth in the case of anger, there is a famous and very beautiful story (told by Ram Dass in his wonderful book [How can I Help](#)), of a big man who was drunk in the subway of Tokyo and causing a disturbance, yelling and endangering the safety of the other passengers. The author of the story, who was a martial arts expert, stood up and challenged him, and the drunk man accepted the challenge. The author was about to “put him away”. He tells he thought of this as the fulfillment of all his martial arts training, a “just cause” at last. A few seconds before this was to happen, a little old man seated nearby spoke to the drunk: *“Hey you! You like saké? Me too! Come sit with me, talk to me”*. The drunk sat by the old man, who spoke to him and comforted him. Before long the drunk was bawling in the arms of the old man. The author of this story was profoundly humbled.

Another beautiful story is told by Wayne Dyer, also a train story. A father came into the subway with his family of 5 boys. They were running around everywhere, playing and shouting. The author of this story was feeling righteous indignation and was about to make a request to the father to control his children. But he did not need to as the father reached out to him and told him that their mother had died just a few hours before. Righteous indignation vanished, needless to say, and was replaced by compassion.

What these stories reveal is that anger, disappointment and many other feelings are what I call “perspectival” or context-based. The “context” is the thought from which the emotion arises – in the first case the thought, or judgment / evaluation, being that *“people*

who endanger public safety should be stopped". In the second case the judgment is *"parents should control their children"*.

From my perspective, the "doctrinal" concept of anger within NVC – which means, practically speaking that you have to be very cautious about mentioning "anger" in an OFNR communication, if you do at all – that's going too far. How I see it is that the thought and the emotion co-arise, it's not like one *causes* the other, exactly. Essentially they are in relationship with each other, in a kind of internal intersubjective we-space. Change the thought (which typically you *do* have the power to do, although in both of these examples the thought-change came from the outside) and the emotion will change. Change the emotion (which typically we do *not* have the power to do, at least in the moment we are feeling it) and the thought will change too.

According to Tony Robbins, you can change the emotion by changing your physiology: try doing jumping-jacks. While this can be a useful tool at times, the problem is that the emotions you suppress tend to either return later with a vengeance, or else come out sideways at the expense of people in your environment (may the Good Lord have mercy on you, and take pity on them). You really do need to get this unpleasant emotion handled. Doing jumping-jacks is good, but it's not a permanent solution.

But let's be positive (LOL): the power here is that you can, theoretically at least, change an unpleasant emotion through an act of will (a change of thinking or a change in physiology). If you *can't* immediately change the thought that is co-arising with the emotion, you can try at least to remind yourself that you know nothing and understand nothing – even and especially about yourself, let alone about other people – and hope that this will calm you. This, by the way, is called "mindfulness". Mindfulness and NVC (along with Circling) fit together like hand-in-glove.

NVC is correct here, in many cases; the danger is going "doctrinal" (or cultish). Sometimes anger just "is". If you are black, or jewish, or gay or trans, or a woman or [fill in the blanks] people have been wanting to suppress and kill you, and sometimes succeeding, for thousands of years. You are right to be angry, you really don't want to stop that feeling or try and identify the thought that is causing it (it's more a question of what you want to do about it which will be effective – the root topic of this book). Even if you are a white, educated, middle-class, cisgender older white male such as me, you have been bullied and brainwashed, conscripted into armies where you died serving imperialism, *"tortured and scared for 20-odd years"* as per John Lennon (that song, [Working-Class Hero](#), is one of my favorites). Even if you are happy now and living in relative comfort – as I am, more or less – you carry the imprint of this and will probably have nightmares about it (I do). This is called "cultural

trauma” (or “ancestral trauma”), a topic we will return to later. Everyone born under patriarchy carries cultural trauma, not just women.

I am giving extreme examples here, while remaining in substantial agreement with “*Every criticism, judgment, diagnosis, and expression of anger is the tragic expression of an unmet need.*”. This is true – as in all things relational – except when it’s not. It’s a valuable perspective to hold, provided you don’t treat it as the *only* perspective. This, by the way, is called “*multiple simultaneous perspectives*”. Your ability to hold multiple simultaneous perspectives is the fundamental skill you will need to access Integral 2nd tier consciousness (also known as “teal” within the Spiral Dynamics model). We return to this in chapter xxx.

I will stop there because I think I have made my point. In many ways, this entire book is about this topic: *what to do when we are angry, which is going to be effective*. Killing people is, very probably, too superficial [Marshall Rosenberg].

Needs as a gift

I conclude this chapter on NVC with one of its most powerful concepts. It’s called “*needs as a gift*”.

At the root of NVC (although sometimes only spoken of when you get to the higher levels), is that NVC is a framework and communication model for evoking, expressing and fulfilling human needs. That includes – *especially* includes – needs for closeness, trust, authenticity and vulnerability. As such, in NVC, *any* expression of need (provided it does not come with an unspoken judgment or demand) is considered a gift, as it gives another person an opportunity to contribute to you and hence make life more wonderful for both of you. (The idea of “making life more wonderful” is also core to NVC: our central desire, according to Marshall, being to “contribute to life”).

As you become more skillful in NVC, you acquire the ability to listen for and reply empathically to the feelings and needs that underlie all human communications – even those communications that are initially expressed as judgments and demands. Do this well, and you will learn to navigate successfully even the most emotionally charged and confrontational of human interactions.

To recap: “needs as a gift” means that if you let someone know what they can do to help you (also known as vulnerability), you are actually helping them too (helping them to make their life more wonderful), because their desire to contribute to you is one of *their* fundamental human needs.

This idea is actually revolutionary, because it is a direct contradiction to Western cultural conditioning. Most of us learn as children that needs are bad. “Needs” make us dependent on other people, vulnerable, “needy”, shameful. Much better, our culture tells us, to ride solo into the sunset, masters of our own destiny, alone and above the crowd and on top of every situation. This may have been a good idea at one time, but it doesn’t work anymore, not even for doing business, let alone in interpersonal relationships. In the complex and inter-related world that we live in, our true strength and power lies through connection and vulnerability. This has been confirmed in work-place studies by Google (among others) which demonstrated that teams who are emotionally bonded are more effective.

In my frame, I consider the desire to contribute to other peoples’ success, happiness, and health to be the masculine pole of love. The feminine pole of love is the desire for understanding, connection and belonging, feelings which flow from expressing vulnerability. I expand on this in chapter 4.

Chapter 3: Introduction to Circling

“Along with chocolate, sex and samadhi, Circling is best experienced directly” – Bryan Bayer, author of The Art of Circling

“A sorrow shared is a sorrow halved. A joy shared is a joy doubled” – Anonymous

Purpose of this chapter

In Chapter 1, we covered the higher-level framework for Circling and Authentic Relating (the reason to do it), along with some of the history and the different practices. I made the distinction between the formal practice of “Circling” (which is a form of Authentic Relating *with* shared context), and the informal practice of “Authentic Relating on the street” (or just “Authentic Relating”, a form of Circling *without* shared context). Then in Chapter 2 we went down-and-dirty into an actual case study of Authentic Relating, a demonstration of how it works.

In this chapter we get even more practical about how to Circle within a facilitated group, and how to use the practice to your best advantage. As already told, formal Circling is somewhat easier and safer than the informal practice of Authentic Relating on-the-street, mostly because the risks you are taking and the damage that you can do are more limited; but formal Circling remains infinitely rich and complex.

Circling is what we call an “infinite game”, something that you can do for the rest of your life and keep on getting better at it. Formal Circling is, bar none, the best way to learn Authentic Relating: because, hopefully, you won’t be wasting any time. You’ve got an hour to practice, typically, so you best “get right to business”. *That would be the business of transformation through self- and other-awareness and honest, loving communication.*

Can you learn Circling from a book? And where to begin?

No, you cannot learn Circling from a book. Circling, like love, can’t be taught in a book, as in Bryan Bayer’s quote above. The successful *practice* of Circling is likely to be way more enjoyable and more growthful than reading about it. Even so, a book can provide a *context* (of shared understanding, shared values) from which a powerful conversation is more likely to emerge.

So where to begin? We begin, of course, with the vulnerable sharing of our confusion about what Circling is and how to do it.

Often in a circle with beginners I hear some variation of this statement: “*I like what’s going on here but I am not quite sure what is acceptable here, what is Okay for me to do or say.*” When I hear this, I usually get happy, for two reasons. First because this expression is a significant *reveal* (an aspect of *leading with vulnerability*, which we will discuss more later), and as such opens up the possibility of a rich inquiry for the individual and for the group. And the second reason I get happy on hearing this, is because it is a profound question that can’t be properly answered in a sound-bite. Indeed, it is a question that lies at the very heart of creating deep, transformational human relationships, and as such is also at the core of the Circling inquiry: **When and how do we give to others; when and how do we receive from them; and when and how do we give to ourselves? What is really going on here between us?**

This book is (among other things) an attempt to answer that question, the question that is at the heart of deep human connection; which in turn relates to the nature of love, the meaning of suffering, and the human journey to wholeness. Ultimately, that is the Circling inquiry.

Circling in a nutshell: the goal of Circling

Circling is a **practice of un-withheld present-moment connection to self and others**. You could also call it “**presence-based relating**” or “**presence-based communication**”, because we return, again and again, to what is happening in the present moment. We investigate our own and others’ present-moment experience of being together, staying present to ourselves while simultaneously trying to understand what it’s like to be in another person’s skin. It’s the attempt to see people for who they really are, “*getting their world*”, and giving and receiving the kind of attention that changes lives and which allows new possibilities to emerge.

An alternative formulation would say that Circling is about discovering “truth”, or about bringing more self-awareness and discernment into the experience of life, in order to cultivate connection with oneself and others. To note here (and we will return to this topic) that “cultivating connection” may involve the noticing and reporting of lack-of-connection.

As such, anything you say or do in a Circling group, or anything you withhold in a Circling group, ought to successfully pass this test: **is this intervention (or conscious decision to NOT intervene) serving connection? Is it serving truth, is it serving the group, is it creating more aliveness in me or others?**

Of course, we frequently make mistakes in judgment about whether a particular intervention and self-expression (or else a failure to express) is serving truth or connection. We may be silent when we should have spoken, or say the wrong thing, or say the right thing but poorly; or we can't come up with anything to say at all, we are so completely befuddled, or full of anger, grief or shame. And yet, we seem to be compelled to keep on trying to communicate and to connect. And hopefully, by allowing ourselves to make these mistakes and then witnessing the impact, we get better at it.

This is the core Circling practice, in my understanding of it. If you have already experienced this degree of connection and of truth-telling (and most of us have, even briefly), then you know what to do, more or less, and you can read the rest of this book with a desire to refine and sharpen your current level of self-awareness and discrimination around this very fundamental question: **am I, in this moment, serving truth and connection, or am I doing the opposite (hiding, lying and creating distance)? Who am I being right now, and why?**

Two more distinctions here that might be helpful.

The first distinction is to acknowledge that while all aspects of our humanity are important – our beliefs and ideas, plans, “stories”, needs and desires, etc. – the Circling practice is unique in that it prioritizes connection and truth-telling above all else. **It does not specifically exclude ideas, plans and stories; it only requests that, when we share stories and ideas, we filter that sharing from the perspective: am I serving connection here?** In the next chapter I say more about the sharing of ideas, stories, advice-giving and coaching within Circling.

And the second distinction which can be helpful, is this: **Circling exposes the meta-conversation** – the thoughts and emotions that all of us have in ordinary human interactions, but which we rarely speak, or speak fully. This is what makes the practice so powerful: because once the in-the-moment emotional truths are being voiced and heard, it becomes possible to take the conversation to a new level, often a level of deep pleasure in which everyone's needs are met, even when they initially seemed diverging. We have all experienced an event such as this. People of a more religious orientation may view this type of event as a miracle, a gift of Spirit. People of a more integral or agnostic mindset might call this “*an alethea moment*”. But regardless of our beliefs, it tends to be a very joyful event.

Circling can be viewed as a relational art form of living from a place where “miracles” happen more frequently.

It speaks somewhat to the dysfunction of our culture, that a practice as simple as Circling (at least in theory) inspires confusion and terror in most people who engage initially.

Circling done well can be either terrifying, intensely pleasurable, or both.

The big challenge of Circling is that it is simple in theory but infinitely complex in execution. *Very much like love, as any parent can tell you.*

Logistics of Circling

When circlers first convene in a group, either in person or via webconference, they are often too numerous for a single circle. In this case they form **breakout groups** of the “optimal” size, which is 3 to 6 people.

There are two common types of circles: **Focus circles**, in which one individual is the focus of attention of the group for a set period of time (although with the inclusion of **reveals** and **impacts** from other participants), and **Flow Circles** (sometimes called **Organic circles**) in which the attention flows back and forth between all participants. Depending on the particular “flavor” of Circling, there will be one or two designated leaders, and a fee which is usually quite modest. There is also a variation of an organic circle called a **Surrendered Leadership circle**, in which the leaders are willing to “surrender” any particular group structure, either totally or partially, in response to what they perceive as the group need. To note however that “surrender”, sometimes known as “welcome everything” is integral to the practice in all schools of Circling.

My favorite style of Circling, and the one that I teach in my courses, is 20-minute Focus circles. In a good group, a 20-minute focus circle is usually *very* powerful. The more experience you have as a circlee, and the more experienced the group, the more transformation or insight you can get in a shorter time. With experienced practitioners, a 15 minute focus circle is all you need. I personally have had my life transformed, many times, in 15 minute focus circles. With less experienced participants, however, you will likely need more time. Of course, the longer the focus circles, the less people will have an opportunity to receive a circle in a group.

While this and the next few chapters are intended as an introduction to the participant role (or “circlee”), rather than the leader role, it is important to say here that everyone in a circle is a “leader”. You “lead” in a circle by providing presence, vulnerability and empathy. This is, indeed, at the very core of the power and magic of the modality, that **in a circle**

one can lead from any position; and thus the collaborative power of the group is multiplied.

Why Circle?

What are the benefits of Circling, why engage the practice? There are several possible motivations, all of which play off each other.

1. Circling is fun!

The experience of being seen and accepted for who we really are, and the sense that we are connected to other human beings and part of a larger whole, is one of the most satisfying of all human experiences. Almost everybody knows how pleasurable this experience can be, and yet most of us move along this path of connecting deeply with others in a haphazard way, achieving success only by accident, as it were.

Unlike most “ordinary” human interactions, such as the kind of conversations that happen in bars, around the water-cooler at work, at church, or even in our families, Circling carries an explicit intent to deeper connection. We go into Circling with the shared desire to “know and be known” in all our humanity, whether our inner experience be glorious or unbearably painful.

Through this agreement to join with others, for a pre-set time, in a shared purpose that includes revealing our truth, Circling tends to cut through the bullshit and the games that we all play, and move us fast into a deeper level of sharing.

2. Circling is developmental

We have already covered this. Ultimately, Circling is a training in human relationships and in self-love. Self-love, self-acceptance and the quality of our human connections are perhaps the most important predictors of happiness, while gaining skill in human relationships is probably the most impactful thing we can do to become more effective in both our personal life and in business. Circling helps us to expand our inner and outer worlds, increase our wisdom and discernment, and become happier, more loving and more effective human beings.

An alternative way of saying this is that **Circling helps us to uncover our relational blind spots**. We all have patterns, ways of being, unhealed hurts and wounds that may push people away and block an experience of deeper intimacy, or deeper friendship and collaboration.

When we get immediate feedback from people about how we occur to them, and especially when that feedback is coming from a place of their wanting to connect with us and get our world, those wounded places become sharper and more clearly defined. From there, our “hurt zones” tend to soften and change into something beautiful, something holy. After being seen in this way, we are often shocked and amazed that we did not get this earlier, realizing that the real situation, the emotional truths and unconscious beliefs underlying our behavior, were obvious to everyone except ourselves. **This is the gift of relatedness, of being able to “see ourselves through the eyes of others”. What’s more, by letting people into our lives and by allowing them to impact us in a positive way, even when they tell us things that might be initially painful, we often help to heal them too.**

3. Circling is a global movement for creating a better society

I believe, along with many others, that Circling and Authentic Relating are truly revolutionary practices which, if they were more widely used, would change human culture and alter the course of human history. By uniting the personal and the political, Circling and Authentic Relating sit at the leading edge of human evolution and human transformational technologies – perhaps even more so than any other modern modality. It’s also very affordable.

The problem of defining and writing about Circling

Circling has been described as “equal parts art form, meditation, and group conversation”. But the truth of the matter is that no one has yet come up with a definition that is fully satisfactory or that everyone can agree on. Even among the 3 “major lineage” schools of Circling, there is controversy about whether what some of them are doing accurately represents the “original” form of Circling, as it was created by Guy Sengstock and Jerry Candelaria. Some people in the movement think that what I am doing is not Circling.

The ultimate cause of these disagreements is that Circling is multi-dimensional (what we call an “integral emergent practice”), and so any attempt to define it will by necessity be limiting. For instance: in this book I am presenting a relationship and communication model that I am calling “Circling”. This model is based on what has worked for me after about 2000 hours of Circling practice, which includes successful

leadership of my own groups. Most circlers will agree that what I am presenting here covers some important dimensions of Circling. But Circling is, at most, 50% a relationship model. It would be more accurate to call Circling a presence practice, sometimes known as “we-space”, “unified field”, or even Transpersonal consciousness.

It is impossible to convey the felt-experience of “we-space” in a book. It is an experience which is informally described by circlers as “dropping in”, as in dropping into connection. It is a kind of softening of boundaries, of surrendering into a larger whole, a sense of completion and of perfection of the present moment. It is a non-verbal experience and as such it can happen without any words being spoken. It is an experience that is quite “contagious”: once a critical mass of people in a group “drops in” it is quite probable that everyone will feel it. It can be a very pleasurable and calming experience, but it can also be painful, poignant, sad, bitter-sweet. It cannot be created through an act of will, or even the best communication. But when it happens, it tends to be very transformational.

I attempt to catalog other “we-space practices” in Chapter xxx, and compare them with the Circling practice.

How it actually works: the “minimal viable Circle”

I fear that I am talking too much here, that all this is just going over your head (or in one ear and out the other), and that what you really want is to learn how to practice. Feel free to jump ahead to Chapter 5, if you want, in which I tell you just that (how to practice) – at least as much as it’s possible to tell in a book.

But before you do that, I want to teach you a practice which I call “the minimal viable circle”, because **it encapsulates the two main dimensions of circling: vulnerability, and impact / empathy / appreciation.** In the next chapter we return to these communications as, respectively, the feminine and masculine poles of love.

The “minimal viable circle” is something that you can do with anyone you have an issue with, want a deeper connection, or just looking for fun; and will most likely create spectacular results. It is more of an “on the street” practice (i.e. you would *not* normally do this in a formal group), but it *will* probably require that your partner be trained in A/R. If you have such a partner (or partners), you can do it in the car, at a restaurant, waiting in line for a movie, or whenever you are having a fight.

It is a fairly simple communication pattern, which, despite its simplicity, is something that you will encounter quite rarely in the world. If people would just do this, every day and all the time (and skillfully, which is not always easy), it would change the world as we know it.

It looks like this:

1. **[Sender] Vulnerable share, a “feelings and needs” statement, optionally followed by a request**
2. **[Receiver] An impact statement (we’ll explain this below), empathy statement, or appreciation**
3. **Sender and receiver either repeat steps 1 and 2, or else reverse roles (i.e. the Receiver becomes the Sender and offers a vulnerable share, etc). Repeat until there is complete love and clarity between the two parties, or until they agree to disagree and pursue their separate interests**

I will spend a moment unpacking the two roles here. This is actually foundational to understanding how Circling works.

Vulnerable sharing

Vulnerable sharing is the first role. As an aside, Brené Brown has built a huge platform based on this idea alone, vulnerability. It’s a very powerful idea.

Returning to the previous Chapter 2 on NVC and “needs as a gift”: **until you let people know what you want, they can’t help you.** Letting people know what you really think and feel, provided you do so skillfully, is always a gift to them, because it gives them an opportunity to care for you and contribute to you, which is very probably what they want. How to do this skillfully *can* be a real problem, however: such as when you are feeling angry at people and blaming them for their failure to meet your needs (which is a very human thing to do). We return to this problem (and its solution) in Chapter 5, in the section called “Own your experience”.

A side-note here: Circling does not value “thinking” over “feeling”. Both are aspects of our humanity and are very important. If you want to become an effective relational leader you do, however, need to increase your awareness of how your communications, your thoughts and feelings, “land” on other people. And from there, tailor your communications in a way that can, ideally, increase their impact. Vulnerability is really an art.

Sharing impacts, empathy, and appreciations

How you respond to a vulnerable share from another person – even an unskillful vulnerable share in which someone is telling you all the things you are doing wrong in meeting their needs, and perhaps what a horrible person you are as well due to your failure to meet their need – is the second important role in Circling.

In Circling, an “impact” is defined as anything that occurs in your experience in relation to another person. It could be a thought, feeling, body sensation, a visual/auditory image, or whatever. Expressing impacts skillfully can be as challenging as expressing vulnerability skillfully. You want to make it about you, as much as possible, rather than about the other person.

I will mention here two specific forms of “impact”: *empathy and appreciations*. Those two communication structures are the most powerful in the entire Authentic Relating arsenal, and you really – really – need to amplify them. **It is almost impossible to overdo the expression of empathy and appreciation.**

An empathy statement is anything the other person says which you can relate to, that speaks to your condition as well, and that makes you feel less alone (because another person has shared an experience that applies directly to your life). Alternatively, an empathy statement is a communication that lets another person know that you understand how they are feeling and that you approve of them as such.

An appreciation is similar, but is less about you. It has to do with an acknowledgement of the value that the other person is offering, to you and others. It relates to your seeing the positive aspects of what they are bringing: *their courage, their heart or caring, their intelligence or clear-thinking or expressiveness or emotional attunement, their relative sanity and resilience in the face of difficult circumstances.* Etc.

Authentic Relating is profound and complex, however there is a simple formula that will very probably make you a winner right out the gate: *double (or maybe quadruple) your empathy statements and appreciations.* Empathy in particular is dead-simple, for the most part. A moron can do it, and it’s 90% probable you will feel better and appreciate it, even if you think the person giving you empathy is a moron. Let alone should you receive empathy from your significant other or your boss.

In Chapter 5, section 6 called “share impact” I discuss why our social conditioning causes us to resist giving impacts and appreciations. **My simple advice: *Get over it.***

Moving forward

In the next Chapter 4, I say more and unpack these two fundamental aspects of the Circling practice: vulnerability, and impacts / empathy / appreciations. I also cover the important topic of emotional charge, and how to express it effectively.

Chapter 4: My framework for emotional literacy; The impact of large-scale developmental trauma; Coaching and story-telling in Circling; Emotional charge and the practice of giving withholds

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?” – Hillel

My framework for emotional literacy: the masculine and feminine poles of love

In my framework for emotional literacy there are only *two* fundamental human needs, which branch off into infinite expressions and infinite emotions which source, guide and inform those expressions. The two fundamental human needs correlate with the masculine and feminine poles of love. I expand on this idea below, and also mention some other teachers whose ideas resonate with mine.

I want to say upfront that I am not certain how important it is to understand my emotional literacy framework for the effective practice of relational leadership. You will have to judge for yourself. Personally, I do find my frame useful as it helps me to be more emotionally present – as opposed to NVC, with its cumbersome list of 100 or so NVC-approved feelings and needs, which I personally do not find useful.

The masculine and feminine poles of love

The Hillel quote above I like very much, as it speaks to one of the fundamental problems of our humanity, **the problem of living in correct balance between the masculine and feminine poles of love.**

I am aware that “masculine” and “feminine” are somewhat dirty words in our world today, a world strongly influenced by what some have called “woke culture”. I might be wise to substitute the words “Yang”

(masculine) and “Yin” (feminine); but for better or for worse, I don’t want to. What I am speaking about is beyond gender, I am referring to universal archetypes (or constellations of thoughts, feelings and needs) which everyone carries in a different mix. These archetypes are often misunderstood, and/or identified with one or the other gender, which is part of the reason for the push-back. **I view these archetypes as the two faces of love, an idea which I am about to unpack.**

Let me get back to the Hillel quote above, and why it speaks to me so powerfully.

What Hillel says, is that you cannot be fully human, or at minimum you can't be effective as a human being, if you operate solely in one pole.

“If I am not for myself” – I, we, have a cosmic obligation to fully discover and express our individuality. In my frame, the desire for individuation and impactful self-expression and creative/effective action is part of the masculine pole of love. It’s the desire to “influence people” in a way that they want, that will improve their lives.

While at the same time **“If I am only for myself”** – the expression of our individuality has no meaning or value outside of our relationship with other people and with the cosmos, and our contribution to the whole. The desire to feel connected to other people, part of a larger whole, and to surrender our individual preferences in service to others is part of the feminine pole of love.

To say this another way: **self-expression without connection (or “care”, or awareness of your impact on others), is domination and/or violence.** Understanding this idea is, practically speaking, very important in Circling (refer to Chapter 5, Section 6 on offering impact). And on the other hand, **connection without self-expression (or without truth-telling, or emotional integrity), is co-dependence, collapse and self-victimization.** None of these options are healthy expressions of power.

And finally **“if not now, when”** – there is an urgency here, both a personal urgency and a cosmic urgency. The personal urgency I feel is that it would be nice to meet God before I die. Or at minimum, find a base level of happiness, contentment, wisdom and contribution.

Remember: it’s not only about your personal happiness; it’s what you can do which makes you part of the solution, rather than the problem. You, we, all of us have a *cosmic obligation* towards what Maslow calls “self-actualization”. It is what humans were designed to do.

The Yin and the Yang of Circling: Connection Intent vs. Developmental Intent

Given that the masculine and feminine poles of love are universal human archetypes, they occur again and again in human relationships. They occur in Circling too, of course. Bryan Bayer (the author of the first book on Circling, The Art of Circling) calls this “the Yin and the Yang of circling”.

There exists an inescapable tension within Circling, between *on the one hand, being non-judgmentally open and accepting to whatever is arising (the so-called “relational meditation”)*; and on the other hand, *being invested or attached to certain outcomes* (such as feeling a sense of connection, having a transformative conversation, or just plain having fun). This is called “connection intent versus developmental intent”. Navigating this tension correctly is the essence of good circling.

Bryan Bayer has a model which I will draw from for the rest of this section. According to Bryan:

- The **Yin of Circling** (feminine aspect) is the more inclusive, embracing aspect of Circling – noticing, feeling and receiving the moment as it unfolds, with “*nowhere to get to but more here*” [Decker Cunov]. This might be the aspect of circling that primarily values “connection”.
- The **Yang of Circling** (masculine aspect) is the more transcendent, active, directive and challenging – it asks penetrating questions, expresses desires, exposes patterns, seeks to achieve closure or else transformative or illuminating outcomes. This is the aspect of circling that primarily values “truth”.

Bryan has a table comparing the type of processes or inquiries that each attitude will generate, and I will not repeat it here; only to say that “Yin” might include: *noticing what’s present, opening up to and feeling and embracing another’s experience*; while “Yang” might be more interested in *naming what is missing (the possibility of having a deeper experience or discovering more truth), drilling in, stepping outside of patterns, enlarging perspective*. These opposing and yet highly complementary attitudes might be summarized by “**I get you and I am here for you**” [Yin], versus “**Here is what you are missing and how it could be better**” [Yang].

The fundamental rule in circling is that **Yin trumps Yang**. This is in the nature of a “commitment to connection”. Connection is achieved

primarily through Yin practices, while excessive Yang practices (such as challenging feedback or advice-giving that is not coming from a place of empathy and understanding) will destroy connection.

However, if we *only* do Yin practices such as empathy and appreciation, while withholding our truth that we are (perhaps) bored or feeling angry, then the group will be flat and generally unsatisfactory, or worse (because when we withhold our true feelings out of fear, or obligation to be “nice”, they often come out sideways and destructively later).

As always, there is no universal formula for navigating these waters. There are also some organizational preferences, with some circling schools (Integral-style circling) more focused on structure and group safety, while others (Circling Europe and Surrendered Leadership) being more willing to break structure even at the risk of creating un-safety. A group that is too Yin (no structure) can occur as going nowhere and possibly even abusive (since lack of guidelines means that people can dump their shit on you), whereas a group that is too Yang (overly structured) can occur as awkward, over-led and disconnected. To note, however, that all schools of circling would agree that “Yin trumps Yang” (otherwise it would not be Circling), so it’s more a question of the *degree of intention* that leaders put into one or the other dimensions of circling. Some schools (Circling Europe in particular) are more willing to “push the envelope” towards the Yin side.

My style of Circling tends to push the envelope towards the Yang side. This, by the way, is controversial in the community, which is why I no longer promote my courses or events as “circling”. You should try different styles (see [Appendix A – Resources](#)) and see what style of Circling resonates most with you.

Jerry Jud, “love is an intention”, and the Circler / Circlee dynamic

Jerry Jud was a mentor of mine, the founder of the [Shalom Mountain Retreat Center](#) in New York State, which is still operating. There is a powerful interview and article about him called “*Love is an intention*” which you can find on the web. Jerry Jud dedicated his life to the full expression of human potential through the art of intentional loving.

Jerry Jud's idea is that **love is an energetic exchange between two people in which both are fulfilled; however it has a directionality, always.** Meaning that: love is, by definition, the willingness to fulfill somebody’s needs, for no other reason than the joy of

it and the pleasure of giving. If you have to pay for it, or if there is an unspoken exchange contract, it's not love.

Consequently, according to Jerry Jud, **you can't love a person who has no needs**. It's also difficult – although not impossible – to love a person who is not aware of their needs or does not express them (also known as vulnerability). “Not impossible” means that you CAN love a person who doesn't express needs or who is unaware of them, simply by intuiting what they need and giving it to them, provided they be receptive to the offer; however, this is challenging. This reflects another fundamental idea of Jerry Jud's (an idea which is shared by Scott Peck in his seminal book The Road Less Traveled) that **mature love is action and intention, rather than a feeling**. As such, Scott Peck would also agree that love has a directionality.

The idea that love has a directionality and that you can't love a person who has no needs is controversial, and yet it is 100% consistent with the NVC notion of “needs as a gift”, and with the practice of Circling as well.

I find the idea important because one of the keys to Circling effectively, at least in my style, is to realize that at any given moment there is one Circlee (or receiver of love from the group). That role is either formal (in the practice of *Focus Circles* in which one individual has the attention of the whole group for a set time), or informal (in the practice of *Flow Circles* or *Organic Circles* in which the Circlee nominates themselves through a vulnerable share).

This is useful to know, because in a Flow Circle or Organic Circle, when someone in a group is in a deep process, the discernment of when to come in with your own stuff is tricky as you are taking the group's attention back on yourself. This is not necessarily a bad thing (your “stuff” is valuable and may well be of great interest to the group), but you need to do it with discernment.

Focused emotional attention has a directionality. This is the definition of “*getting their world*”. This type of structured, directional attention and communication is actually rare in the world, which is the ultimate reason that Circling is so effective. In the world, people tend to blab on endlessly about their own stuff with no awareness of the impact (or even interest) of their communications to other people, and/or of the time and attention they are taking from others. Many communications in the world are simply unconscious ploys for attention and validation from others. **In Circling, we want to bring more attention to the impact of our communications, and we also want to be more revealing of the needs and desires which are driving these**

communications, in whatever role we happen to be in at the moment (i.e., Circler or Circlee).

Note that in advanced circles it may be difficult to identify a role, as the attention flows back and forth seamlessly and rapidly. *However, there is always a Circlee.* It might be fun for you to try and discern who the current Circlee is in a group, and name it. Or else – even more valuable – what role *you* are taking in the interaction. What is your motivation for sharing: *are you wanting to make a contribution to the other person (the masculine pole of love) or are you wanting your own healing, empowerment, and feeling of closeness (the feminine pole of love).* **Both roles are important, and neither role could exist without the other.**

It is really one of the tragedies of Western culture and its patriarchal framework, that the masculine role is seen as superior. “*Riding solo into the sunset*” as the ultimate form of empowerment, a myth which pervades much of the self-help industry, and which Brené Brown is doing much to change through her work with vulnerability.

Sexual Polarity according to David Deida and Victor Baranco

David Deida is a famous tantric author. His writings cover many topics, mostly related to having powerful and transformative sexual relationships through deliberately occupying one or the other polarity (which, incidentally, applies to non-heterosexual couples too, according to him). Both his teaching and his personality are quite controversial (I am personally not very fond of him), but I agree with most everything he says.

Deida makes a very compelling critique of modern-day sexual relationships, especially in America where “sexual polarity” has gone out of favor; mostly, in my opinion, because people identify it with gender-roles and cultural oppression around that, which is a misunderstanding of his ideas. Sexual polarity in Deida is a *choice*, maybe momentary; although he also says that there is a correlation between gender and one’s preferred polarity, the polarity that a person prefers to inhabit most of the time (not all the time! That would not be healthy). Your preferred polarity (should you choose to align with these ideas) is the polarity in which you are typically, happiest and most productive. You may also choose to vary your primary (or dominant) polarity according to the roles you play in the world. Or alternate them. It’s all good, it’s just a question of bringing more self-awareness into how you “be” with other people, of what polarity you are showing up in.

I am fairly critical of David Deida on a number of points, and I think he misses a lot in terms of having successful sexual relationships with real, actual women. My main critique is that in my model, skill in the masculine and feminine poles of love are separate dimensions (rather than a “sexual polarity scale” with masculine on one end and feminine on the other); and hence the goal is to become skilled in *both* dimensions. I am not sure that Deida speaks to that, or is aware of it.

However, if you complement David Deida’s ideas with another of my mentors, Victor Baranco, you get a much more comprehensive and useful model for having powerful, transformative sexual relationships. Getting into that here would be out of scope, but if you Google “*Authentic Singles, a lecture on sexual polarity*” you can read about my ideas there.

These ideas actually *do* apply to Circling, as sexual tension and/or attraction will occasionally arise in circles. And also, obviously, sexual relationships being such an important part of our humanity, these issues will surface in circles.

The impact of large-scale developmental trauma

Circling is actually *very* powerful for healing what has come to be known as “developmental trauma”. We return later to this topic, but it is so important I want to give a summary of the problem here.

We are holding an enormous amount of pain, individually and collectively, and this is the indirect cause of almost all of the heartless, stupid and destructive things that we humans do. Unscrupulous leaders are able to use our unconscious pain and fear for political purposes and financial gain. They have done so throughout the ages, with the 20th and early 21st centuries being especially horrifying. Partly because modern tools of destruction are so much more powerful than they were before; and partly because the use of state-sponsored and media-created cult psychology has been so effective for both political and financial gain (an excellent documentary on the use of mass cult psychology for financial gain is the BBC documentary [The Century of the Self](#), Part 1).

The logical consequence of the all-pervasiveness of developmental trauma and cult psychology, is that we have a personal, moral and social obligation to clear, or at least effectively address, our individual and collective pain. **We do this by getting with other people and talking about it. We have a moral obligation to clear our**

developmental trauma (because if we don't, we are part of the problem rather than the solution).

Love, authentic happiness, and courageous, heartfelt self-expression are contagious. There are very, very strong reasons to create a world of authentically happy, self-expressed people. Happy people are naturally (for the most part) more generous, more creative and more free, and harder to manipulate. Authentic happiness is contagious. **I actually view this fact (of the “contagiousness” of love) as our single greatest hope to save the planet.** It might not be enough; but it is *certain* that without it, our children and grand-children are screwed.

We return to the topics of Developmental Trauma in Chapter xxx and to Cult Psychology in Chapter xxx.

Ideas, Story-telling, Advice-giving, and Coaching in Circling and Authentic Relating

We began this topic in the previous chapter. **The idea is that Circling is 100% a presence-based (or present-moment experience) practice; and yet ideas, plans, stories, coaching and even advice-giving are permissible in Circling and Authentic Relating, under certain circumstances which I will discuss here.**

The “problem” is that ideas, stories and coaching can take us out of the moment and into our heads, and therefore need to be used with discernment in Circling groups, if at all. But here is a key distinction: given that ideas and stories are usually part of our present-moment experience of being “us”, whether they are expressed or not; and given that Circling is ultimately about the full expression of our humanity – **we really can't (and/or don't want to) entirely suppress the expression of ideas, plans and stories.**

Coaching, advice-giving and story-telling are especially problematic on another person's focus circle. There *are* situations where this is permissible in Circling and Authentic Relating. With great discernment, however, as I will describe next.

This is a complex problem (how much story-telling, sharing of ideas and coaching is appropriate and permissible in Circling). However I will give you a rule-of-thumb: **you can do and say whatever you want in Circling or Authentic Relating, provided you name it (and ideally, ask permission first).** As in:

- “This may be a little coachy (or advice-y), but let me say it...”.
- Or “I really want to share a story here (and I hope this is not too long or boring”).
- Or even more direct: “I feel so much like giving you advice here. Is it okay?”. This is called an “owned communication”. We return to this topic in the next chapter.

The situation occurs very commonly in beginner Circling groups (and even more frequently in the world), that people either go over-long into their stories, or coach without permission (also known as “teaching to no appetite”), or even give advice, tell you what they themselves have done to solve the problem in a similar situation (which may be irrelevant to you, because you are not them). These types of communications, and especially if they are not “owned” (i.e. they are spoken without naming them), will take the group out of presence.

Coaching and excessive story-telling will create distance, if the circlee is currently not open or interested in being coached. Meaning, the circlee may just want to be *witnessed*. It is especially not helpful in what’s called an “impact round” (this is when a circlee has expressed a willingness to hear other’s impacts on their share), for you to go into a long story about your own stuff, which may either be too long or of no interest to the circlee. This takes the attention off of the Circlee, which you *really* do not want to do, either in a formal circle, or in “Authentic Relating on the street” with a new person who has opened themselves up to you. This is the #1 relational mistake that people make: *excessive story-telling, or bringing the attention back on themselves with unwanted story-telling or advice-giving.*

Impact statements need to be short, ideally. And truthfully, all effective emotional communications ought to be as short as possible without losing anything important. This is one of the great skills of Circling and of good relational leadership.

The most powerful impact statements are empathy and appreciation, as already told in the previous chapter. However, coaching, advice-giving, and telling your own story of how you relate to the circlee, can be seen as impact statements too, although these types of communications are in a “gray zone” where effective human communication is concerned (in or out of formal circles). *You need to be especially discerning when you are giving coaching or advice-giving, of how much time you are taking and whether this is actually welcome, or helpful, to the circlee (i.e., be aware of how this is “landing” on the circlee).* In case of doubt, just be silent.

The nature of emotional charge and the practice of giving withholds

Understanding what I call “emotional charge” is extraordinarily important in effective emotional communication, especially with a person you are having an issue with. It is a concept that is actually NOT part of any Circling curriculum that I am aware of. But if you want to practice effective Authentic Relating in the world, you *must* understand this.

The basic idea I already shared in the NVC chapter, relating to inter-subjective reality: **that our communications are not just words, they are energy**. “Emotional charge” is any kind of [probably unspoken] upset, judgment, or make-wrong you have towards another person. This is called a “withhold”. Particularly a “*negative withhold*” – i.e. a negative emotion or judgment you have towards another person but which you have *withheld*, or not told them. Note however, that you can have “positive withholds” as well: such as your not sharing how important a person is to you, or how much you value something they have said and done for you.

Withholds, whether they be positive or negative, kill intimacy. I will say this again: *withholds kill intimacy*. You have to do something about your withholds towards other people, if you want to be close to them and them to you.

I will start with the problem of “positive withholds”. This problem is extremely easily solved by giving an appreciation, which is one of the two most powerful tools in the Authentic Relating arsenal (the other one being empathy). This can be scary, but you need to get over it in order to become an effective relational leader. We return to this topic in the next chapter, including the rare times where giving appreciation is inappropriate or not useful.

Negative withholds are more complex, for the following reason: if you attempt to initiate a clearing conversation with someone you have a “negative withhold” towards, but without awareness and/or consciousness of the judgments or make-wrongs or hurt feelings you are carrying towards them, it will usually not go well. The reason there being, as mentioned above, that it won’t even matter what you say, your words will be unimportant because the person won’t even hear them: all they will hear is the [unspoken] *energy* that you are bringing to the interaction, all the anger and judgments and make-wrongs you are thinking about them, and will very probably push-back.

If, in addition, you are coming into the conversation with a need or even demand that they hear you, and they respond instead with their own

judgments and distancing, their push-back might enrage you further and lead to the opposite of what you want: more distance from this person and more anger and both sides.

The problem of communicating effectively with someone you are angry with is thorny, at best. Especially when the other person lacks emotional literacy.

Effective communication through anger is *much* easier if you both understand the nature of anger, if one or both of you does the practice of “giving withholds with shared context” with a third-party prior to speaking to your partner, or even if you begin your clearing conversation with a formal “giving withholds” practice (meaning, you can exchange withholds before even beginning the actual “negotiation”, as described below).

With an emotionally literate person you are close with but angry towards, starting the conversation with formal withholds might cut 80% of the time, difficulty and trauma of clearing your anger towards them (and/or their anger towards you).

There is a different practice called “giving withholds without shared context”. I will speak about that in Chapter xxx.

Understanding the nature of anger

Understanding the nature of anger within my framework for emotional literacy can be very valuable in resolving it. What I am about to say is an extension of Marshall Rosenberg’s ideas.

The way this works typically requires getting you and your partner in “shared reality” (or “shared context”) of what anger really is. Anger is (usually) a negative emotion arising from a need not being met (except when it’s not, which we already covered). If you accept the idea of the two fundamental human needs, to love and be loved (masculine and feminine aspects, respectively), then **anger is a corrective emotion whose purpose is ultimately to restore love, the satisfying bi-directional flow of attention and understanding .**

Once you fully understand the idea that anytime someone is angry towards you (or you are angry with them), it (usually) comes from a desire to restore closeness, it will fundamentally change your relationship to anger, yours and others. This is, however, a very high game. It’s also not an idea that you can merely understand intellectually (although understanding it intellectually will help). You have to “get it in your gut”.

Here is how this idea might work in a formal circle and with emotionally literate people.

In a formal circle, “connection intent” is a shared context. Everyone in the group knows, for instance (or ought to know) that if you get angry at another participant, and/or express your anger not-skillfully (which *will* happen, remember this is a training camp and mistakes ought to be welcome) – well, people in the group will know (or ought to know) that the reason you are expressing that anger is ultimately to get into connection with that person. You are angry because something has gone wrong with your inherent need for human connection, understanding and empathy. **You are angry because you are feeling not-seen or not-heard or disrespected, you know that something needs to be said or done, but you are not sure exactly *what* needs to be done, yet. This is also called “being triggered”, which is something like a more mild, or gentle, version of outright anger (or hurt, or fear).** Something has happened, but you may not be entirely sure *what* is happening to you inside, exactly, or what you should do about it. You just know you are feeling dis-ease, and probably some pressure to *do something*, such as defend yourself, counter-attack, or withdraw.

Expressing anger fulfills many needs, but the main one is typically *the clarification of your internal limits and needs with respect to other people*. **Hence, underneath that expression of anger is the desire to clarify your limits, and underneath that impulse to clarify your limits is the desire to be close to this person again – a closeness which you felt, hopefully, before they pissed you off.** Hence, expressing anger is *almost always* a desire to be close to another person.

In the real world (i.e., outside of a formal group), it is unlikely that the target of your anger (or even you) will be aware of this. Which basically means that the two of you are (most probably) communicating unconsciously, which is problematic.

The practice of giving withholds with a person you are close to is the easiest way to resolve that anger. Which doesn’t mean it is *easy*, none of this is usually easy. To “resolve anger” means to get clear on the *reason* that you are triggered, and what needs to be done about it, if anything.

You don't need to get what you want if you can express what you want

An important caveat here relating to anger and “what needs to be done about it”: sometimes, simply *expressing* a feeling clears it, with no further action required, especially once you feel “gotten” or understood by another person. This idea mirrors the saying “*you don't need to get what you want, if you can express what you want*” [Strephon Kaplan-Williams], which is one of the most powerful ideas in all of the theory of emotional communication.

It takes a great deal of maturity and experience to fully embody the idea of “*you don't need to get what you want, if you can express what you want*”. You will, most likely, understand this experientially at some point: *you will express a feeling or a need towards a partner or friend, feel “gotten” in that, and realize that being “gotten” is all you really wanted, and that you no longer need or even want the other person to change beyond that.*

However, there is another, and even more advanced level: **you express a feeling or desire towards someone, you are NOT gotten in that, and yet you are STILL happy (or proud) that you said it.** This is a level of consciousness or emotional maturity which, I will confess, I personally have not yet mastered. I am working on it, however.

The practice of giving withholds (with shared context)

Giving withholds (with shared context) is an extraordinarily powerful practice, but one that is not taught anywhere that I am aware of, even inside Authentic Relating (I actually got it from Victor Baranco and Morehouse – for more information on that Google my article “Victor Baranco history”).

As guidelines:

1. Don't do this with a stranger, or a person who is not emotionally literate
2. Don't do it with someone who doesn't understand the structure
3. (Probably) don't do it with your intimate partner unless they are in a receptive place

4. Be cautious about doing this with someone towards whom you have a tremendous amount of emotional charge, or history (hence prior advice regarding your partner)

But with those caveats: Try it. You may both love it, and it may save much time and grief in processing emotional issues between you.

So what is a withhold? It's an *owned communication of emotional charge*. You are communicating emotion (maybe anger) with an express desire to clear emotional charge in order to return to a space of love (or to clear emotional charge prior to beginning an actual negotiation). You are communicating emotions, thoughts and judgments – maybe even very harsh thoughts and judgments, which you would *never* say in a regular conversation or negotiation – with the implicit understanding that nothing you are saying is “true”, exactly. You are communicating things – maybe just momentary emotions such as “I hate you” – in order to release emotional charge, with the explicit goal of “clearing your head” so you can get to the truth of what you are really thinking and feeling in this situation (meaning: it is highly unlikely that you actually “hate” your partner. But saying it in a withhold structure may help you get clear on what you *are* really feeling).

Here is how it works:

1. **Get with the person you have withholds towards and ask them permission if you can share a few withholds. Make sure they understand the structure (in the previous paragraphs) and they are fully willing to give you their love, time and attention for a period of time.**
2. **Give the first withhold (i.e. “*I hate it when you answer your phone when we are having a conversation*” or “*I love you for doing withholds with me*”).**
3. **Your partner responds with “*thank you, is there more?*”. Your partner does not say anything else and attempts also to not give any non-verbal feedback. This is *your* withhold session, both of you know it's 100% “your stuff” and that what you are saying may not even be true, or any more than a transitory emotion.**
4. **You both repeat the previous two steps until you are done or the agreed time runs out.**
5. **Normally (but not necessarily) you would switch roles and receive withholds from your partner.**

That's it. There is a further agreement to *not* bring up withhold content in a normal conversation without permission (it's best to respond to withhold content through another withhold). Remember as well, that you will probably have positive withholds towards your friend or partner, things you have not told them of how much you love them and appreciate them. Don't hold these back (such as in the example above).

Good luck with this. Let me know how it goes.

Chapter 5: Circling best practices: the “living laboratory of love” and how to make it work for you

“You will always outlive my concept of you. And, I will always have a concept for you to outlive.” – Guy Sengstock, founder of Circling

“There is no place to get to but more here” – Decker Cunov, co-founder of Circling

In this chapter we get right into the attitudes and communications that are most likely to serve truth and connection. *This is your job as a relational leader: serve truth and connection, all the time, as best you can.* And when you can’t, or make a mistake, name it and apologize.

These are guidelines only and must be tested against your intuition at all times. As such, there are suggestions here that may be wrong or not fit for you. If so, ignore the suggestion. Also, don’t try too hard to be a “good circler”, just do your best to follow and align with the energy of the group, stay true to yourself, and remember that there is no right or wrong way to do this, and that even the best and most experienced leaders sometimes make “mistakes”.

This is the final “introduction chapter” for Circling. **After reading this chapter you will be fully prepared to find a circle and start practicing. You can’t learn to circle from a book, you will need to practice.** In Parts 2 and 3 of this book, I will continue to draw distinctions, give advice, talk about the cultural context, etc. But finishing Part 1 of this book ought to be enough to get you started.

Circling vs. Authentic Relating

In this book, I am defining “Circling” as the formal practice of Authentic Relating within a group, and “Authentic Relating” as the informal practice, also known as “Authentic Relating on the street”. You can practice Authentic Relating at any time with another person, or else in a group while in a bar, a restaurant or waiting in line for a movie, and without communicating your intentions. You can practice Authentic Relating seamlessly wherever you show up. **Indeed, once you get good at it you will probably want to do it all (or most) of the time.** Even if you are *not* consciously or deliberately practicing, it will probably

inform and fundamentally change the nature of your relationships and how you show up for people.

There are a few ways of doing this.

The first option is to say nothing explicitly, simply try to increase the quality of your listening and emotional presence with someone, and/or ask them personal questions, giving free reign to your curiosity. Alternatively, just double your appreciations and your positive impact statements, that will also do the job.

Another option, maybe a better one especially in a group, would be to say something like *“I would like to play a game, who is in?”* and then tell them the game that you want to try. There are a large number of Authentic Relating Games in [Sara Ness’ Games Manual](#), which you can find on www.authrev.com and also on Amazon. Or you can make up your own games. My favorite is called “the hot-seat game”, which I have already described in Chapter 1. You can suggest to your friends to play hot-seats or any other A/R game. The hot-seat game is especially fun and suitable to play at someone’s birthday party (i.e. put them on the hot-seat and explain the rules to the crowd).

The problem of “Authentic Relating on the street”

Starting below I will share 13 elements of effective Authentic Relating (these are arbitrary, by the way, there are many more). For some of these elements, you must approach things differently if you are doing Authentic Relating on the street versus in a formal circle. I will highlight the different approach required for each element in “boxed text” such as this.

1. Notice feelings and body sensations

Until we are connected to our felt experience of life, which includes our experience of being in our body in this moment, we have little to give to others in an emotional way.

When you start Circling, you will likely often hear questions in the nature of: *“what are you feeling right now?”*, or *“what is going on for you right now”*, or *“how did that land”* (when someone gives you feedback, or else a significant “reveal” of where they are at in relationship to you). These questions are all an invitation from others to deepen our experience of what it’s like to be us, and then to communicate that. They are asking us these questions because they want to feel us more in order to get our world.

People have a greater or lesser skill, or ability, to accurately feel into and discern the true nature of their current emotional experience. Some of us are quite “heady” and have trouble identifying and articulating our felt experience. Others feel so much they have trouble distinguishing their deepest and truest emotions from all the “noise”. Almost all of us have trouble, to a greater or lesser degree, in distinguishing our own true feelings and desires from the projections, needs and demands of others, and/or in articulating those feelings in the midst, perhaps, of our fear and anxiety that we will not be received – or worse, that people will be angry and reject us, even as we attempt to express our deepest truths and most tender secrets.

For those of us of a more intellectual orientation, myself included, a question such as “*what are you feeling in your body now*” can occur as downright annoying, a distraction. Of course we can choose to express that annoyance in a circle, but generally the best attitude is to assume that when someone is inquiring into our felt experience, and/or giving us feedback that they are not feeling us, or else feeling us a lot but without clarity or discernment of what’s most important, that their intervention is coming from a desire to connect with us more deeply. And to appreciate them from that place, given their attempt, no matter how awkward, to get to know us.

2. Connect with the group – up to a point (follow your aliveness)

Once you start noticing your responses to the circle, and have made your best commitment to “presence” (however you interpret that, but think *non-attachment, non-reactivity, non-doing*), things can get interesting – possibly even extremely interesting. Specifically: your own desires, attachments and aversions will start to surface and you will have a choice to either look at them or space-out (or numb out). You will be faced with choices of whether to communicate your feelings, and how to do it. All kinds of emotions can come up, from boredom to attraction to rage to vague un-nameable discomforts and more.

Ideally your attitude towards these thoughts, feelings and sensations would be to “welcome everything”. This is fundamental to circling and we will be returning to this idea throughout this book. For now, I only want to suggest you try this: **connect or align with the group as much as possible, but without betraying yourself. In other words, *follow your aliveness*.**

To “follow your aliveness” means to stay close to your truth in relation to yourself and to other people. It does *not* mean always communicating your truth (this topic also we will return to). It means accepting that how you are and what you feel, is okay. You cannot force connection, even though you may enjoy it and think it’s a good thing; and you can’t avoid feelings of disconnection, even though these feelings may scare you, make you angry, cause you to judge yourself and others, or feel like a failure.

Sometimes in a circle, maybe even frequently, you will either be feeling nothing, or else you won’t know exactly what you are feeling or how to articulate it. There is nothing wrong with that and indeed it is inevitable. Don’t beat yourself up for it. You can speak of your flat emotional state, of your confusion or anger or whatever, if you like. Or you can just be silent and wait. It’s up to you and it’s all good.

The closer you stay to your aliveness, and to your truth in relation to other people, the more likely it is that you and the group will “drop” into connection. Learn to trust yourself in that, to trust that your showing up authentically in your fear, confusion, rage, vulnerability or whatever, is not just serving you, but is also serving the group.

The more you circle, formally or informally, the more you will develop this fundamental skill of trusting yourself and your reactions, also known as “*trusting your experience*”. Note that “trusting your experience” may at times consist of taking challenges or negative feedback from group members around your true intent and way of showing up. This will carry the “trust” one step deeper, of course. Be aware, as well, that learning to trust yourself and to distinguish and articulate your feelings in an accurate and yet compassionate way, is an “infinite game”, something you will likely be working on for the rest of your life. Have some compassion for yourself, because sometimes it will be hard.

3. “Get Their World”: Lead from Attention, Curiosity, and Empathy

To “lead” in a circle means, essentially, to model to others what we want to happen in the group. This is much more effective, in Circling and in all human relationships, than demanding to be treated a certain way, or asking other people to be more or less of how they are currently being – although there can be room for that, as well, especially when they feel accepted and seen by us.

Ultimately, everyone wants to be seen, understood, and accepted for their unique qualities and gifts. The more we do this, the more likely it is that

other people will reciprocate. **But even if they don't reciprocate, the act of offering other people our attention, curiosity, and empathy can be very rewarding.**

Curiosity is a desire to know someone, and is the first step of empathy, the attempt to accurately mirror back to someone their felt experience.

Genuine curiosity and empathy are extraordinarily effective in human relationships, simply because this is not usually something that people get a lot of. Curiosity about people and the desire to know and be known are universal human longings; and yet almost all of us are, to a greater or lesser degree, wounded or shut-down in this area. Many of us are quite timid in expressing our natural human curiosity towards others, often out of social conditioning about respecting other people's privacy – and while this is true in some cases, in other cases, people are very happy to share their intimate feelings with us. With a little prompting, they might even share things that they have never shared with anybody before – even if they have just met you. Such is the strength of the human hunger for authentic connection.

Expressions of Attention, Curiosity, and Empathy

The primary tool of empathy is called **reflection**. Simply repeat what you heard the person say, maybe even in their exact words. For instance, say:

- *What I hear you saying is... Am I getting it right?*

As a caution here, don't do this mechanically. If you are not feeling or understanding what they are saying, you can follow your reflection with a clarifying question:

- *... but I am not sure I am fully getting you (and I want to get you), because I don't understand...*
- *Or else: but I am still a bit confused about...*

For the rest, providing curiosity and empathy is, for the most part, quite simple. Try any of the following:

- *“What's it like to be here with us (or, to be the center of attention)?”*
- *“How is it to share that with us?”*
- *“I am curious about...”*

- *“You seem upset right now (or angry, or irritated, or anxious, or peaceful, or soft...). Is that true? If so, can you say more about that?”*
- *“I am imagining that you feel...”*

Another frequently-used (and very effective) aspect of empathy is called **validation**, the attempt to articulate their felt experience in a way that lets them know that you understand why they are feeling this way and you approve of them as such. You can try:

- *“That makes sense to me because...”*
- *“If I were in your shoes, I would be angry all the time at so-and-so, etc., and so I find it quite amazing that you are able to behave so lovingly”*
- *“Of course you are doing that (or feeling that way), I can totally get it because...”*

You can improvise endlessly around these themes. It is really quite unusual for people to *not* respond to genuine curiosity, or to attention that is coming from a place of interest and with no ulterior motives, at least motives that you are aware of. In fact, most of the time, it is *we* who are hung-up about asking sensitive questions, and not the people that we have curiosity about. Even in a situation with a stranger, you can often “prepare” them for a sensitive question by asking permission or expressing vulnerability, as in:

- *“I am shy about asking you this, but...”*
- *“I am intrigued by you and wonder if you would be willing to tell me about...”*
- and you can also open directly with an appreciation: *“You occur to me as a very open person, so I am going to take the chance to ask you this...”*.

Try this. You may be shocked at the results.

Empathy: Authentic Relating on the street

- In offering empathy, you will need to accept that sometimes you will be dead wrong in discerning or articulating another person’s feelings. If so, take it gracefully. There is no need to defend

yourself or justify what made you think this way about them. Besides, it's highly probable that even if you *are* dead wrong, that your suggesting to someone of how they might feel will help them get clearer. It is also important to use ownership language here (see later on). You really cannot know how someone else feels, you can only *take a guess, and then ask them if you are right*.

- You may be deeply curious about an aspect of someone that they don't want to reveal or that makes them very uncomfortable. You have to be sensitive to this. Don't take it personally if they don't want to share, or even if they get angry at the question. The rule of thumb here is: don't restrict your genuine curiosity, and ask the question anyway, up to the point in which it becomes clear that this is a direction that they don't want to go. Honor yourself in asking the question you are curious about, and also honor the other person and respect their right to not answer.

4. Validate and Appreciate

Besides providing attention, curiosity and empathy, offering validation and appreciation are also practices which are virtually guaranteed to transform all your relationships, in Circling and outside of it. This may seem obvious, but the practice is so powerful and so simple, at least in theory, that it bears repeating.

Most of us resist telling people that we find them interesting and attractive, or their ways of being that we find loveable, courageous or intriguing. We all have our reasons for withholding, and we are also victims of a great deal of cultural conditioning relating to the inappropriateness of communicating feelings, be they positive or negative. But to achieve mastery in human relationships, it is *essential* to kill, once and for all, our internal messages that telling people how much we like them, or the reasons that we appreciate them, is inappropriate.

Part of the difficulty is that giving sincere appreciation is, oddly, scary. In addition to cultural conditioning, we may fear that telling people how much we like and admire them will be taken as a disguised attempt to get something from them, or get them to like us in return – and indeed this may be the case, we may need to examine our motives. Furthermore, there are cases where giving positive feedback and appreciation is simply not appropriate: you will probably not want to tell your boss how sexy you find them. At least not in the staff meeting. You

must be sensitive to whether a person *wants* to be appreciated, and the *kinds* of appreciation they may be seeking. This can be tricky.

Nonetheless, **the simple truth is that 90% of people will respond positively to a sincere compliment, validation or appreciation 90% of the time.** And in many cases, even when they are *not* overly effusive or responsive to the appreciation, or dismiss it entirely (“*you like that dress? That’s just an old thing*”), they will secretly enjoy it and feel closer to you. So do not be overly timid.

Guidelines and Cautions

Appreciation and validation have some dangers, which relate mostly to other people’s perception of your sincerity and to the quality of your own vulnerability (i.e. it’s not a one-way street). Here are some guidelines.

- It is very important to make an effort to appreciate someone for their impact on you, rather than your assessment or judgment about them, no matter how positive. “Praise” (sharing your positive judgment of someone) can be seen as the flip-side of blame, and may be manipulative. For instance: it is better to say “*You seem so courageous to me, and I am so inspired by that*” than “*you are so courageous*”. It is possible that a person might not see themselves as courageous, and if that is true, they will likely be more receptive to your communicating the impact they are having on you, which is inarguable for them, than in accepting that they are indeed, courageous. Your statement will be more believable and more powerful. (Note: this is another instance of the benefit of “trying to make an unarguable statement”, as discussed below).
- By the same token, it is best to appreciate something *specific* about them, rather than to make a general statement about them. For instance: “*I love you so much*” is not a bad thing to say, but it might be more effective to say “*I love how clear you are in articulating what is important to you and in asserting your boundaries*”. The latter statement gives more *information*. Sometimes this is referred to as “*give a specific frame*”. A “frame” is a specific event in time (“*I felt you the most when you said...*”) rather than a general statement.
- In appreciating someone, be careful of “people pleasing”. In other words, value whether your appreciation has truth, depth and importance to you, more than you value trying to make the other person happy and relaxed, or to have them like you more. Of

course, your desire to please can be present. That is fine but you may want to own it. You could say something like, “*I know this is stupid, and maybe inappropriate, but I wish you could see things how I do, of how harshly you are judging yourself and that your behavior isn’t as bad as you imagine it to be*”. What you are owning up to here is your desire to make them happy. It’s not your job to make other people happy, and especially not in circling J.

- Be direct and be succinct. Don’t go on and on about how wonderful they are. The goal here is to give them something to reflect on, so be brief and put the attention back on them as quickly as possible.
- Finally, consider the idea that the skills of directness and brevity are actually something to practice in all of your human interactions, so start now with the “easy communications”, and then once you get better at it, move on to the more difficult communications, in which brevity will be even more important.

Compliments and Appreciations: Authentic Relating on the street

Compliments and appreciations are extremely powerful for creating connection, especially when there is not an implicit context for connection such as exists in a formal circle. As such, compliments and appreciations have a big place in Authentic Relating.

In Authentic Relating you can be much more relaxed and uninhibited in giving compliments and appreciations. While you would never want to be insincere, it is more permissible in Authentic Relating to give compliments out of a pure desire (or at least part-desire) to have an impact on somebody and to have them notice you, like you and want to be your friend.

This takes us into some gray zones of human relationship (is it okay to manipulate someone for their own good?). It is a deep question, but there is a rule-of-thumb which you might find helpful. Ask yourself: **do I have a sincere desire to contribute to another person by communicating something true about myself and how I perceive them? And (important) is this communication likely to be a contribution to them?** If you don’t get a clear “yes” to those two questions, maybe it’s best to remain silent.

As an alternative to expressing direct appreciation, you can communicate interest, attraction or connection intent to someone non-verbally; and you

can also visualize connection (check the [Heart Math](http://www.HeartMath.com) process, www.HeartMath.com – this is very powerful).

But with those caveats: don't hold back. *Try and imagine what the person would like to hear, and if it is at all true for you, just say it.* Sometimes it is even okay to communicate sexual interest or attraction towards strangers (in a formal circle it is almost always okay to communicate attraction). But use your judgment and don't take it personally if the person rejects your appreciation.

5. Lead from Vulnerability

In addition to offering curiosity, empathy, and appreciation, which are aspects of trying to elicit, understand and support another person's felt experience, you will also want to reveal your own felt experience. Sharing your true feelings, and especially those feelings which you are most afraid to reveal, angry, ashamed, or guilty about (the "unacceptable" feelings), is the second key aspect of leadership in Circling.

Why is sharing vulnerability such a powerful practice for creating connection? **First because it is a courageous act of love.** People usually *want* to know us, they want to feel connected to us and get our world. When we share our feelings with people without a demand or expectation that they respond in any particular way, we give other people the opportunity to contribute to us.

The difference between "complaining" and vulnerability is that in true vulnerable sharing we are opening ourselves up to feedback, rather than speaking for the pleasure of hearing our own voice or of making ourselves look better than other people. *True vulnerability opens up a dialogue, and for this reason it tends to be very attractive;* but it's also taking a risk, because people may not be interested in contributing to us in that moment, and because they may respond with fear to our vulnerability or be repelled by it. Vulnerability can be scary, on both the sending and the receiving end of it, and this is perhaps what makes it so interesting and exciting. Nonetheless, in many cases people will thank us afterwards for telling them how we really feel, for opening up a conversation that has the potential for being transformational for everyone.

And the second reason why sharing vulnerability creates connection, is that often **people see it as permission to share more of themselves as well.** Typically, as we share more, so do they, which then gives us permission to say even more and get more real still. Ideally, this keeps on amplifying so long as we are with the person, or with the group;

and the next time we come back together, we continue where we left off and maybe go deeper still.

You may find this experience quite addictive. You may find that you can't get enough of it. Some people, including myself, believe that humans are meant to relate like this all the time. But we tend to forget about the power and importance of curiosity, empathy and vulnerability. We tend to forget the extraordinary impact that these simple practices can have on others and ourselves.

Most of us have a great deal of attention on ourselves, on our own thoughts, problems and needs. Learning to enlarge that circle of attention is the essence of becoming more fully human. We do this by paying attention to others – deep attention – and then reflecting back to them what we see, or imagine, of their internal state. Almost everyone will brighten visibly when you do this with them. It is even possible that it will be the first time in their lives that they receive real kindness from anyone, or that they feel entirely seen and understood by another human being. It's possible that in one minute, you can alter the course of their life.

Vulnerability: Cautions

Being vulnerable means to share both positive and “negative” feelings that you may have towards yourself and others. In choosing what to share and what to hold back, you have to judge whether you are serving truth and connection. This is not always easy to determine.

In Circling, as in all human relationships, you can (and should) be very uninhibited about sharing positive feelings you have towards others. You can also be fairly uninhibited in sharing your own fears, anxieties and insecurities about yourself. You do, however, need to be cautious in sharing negative feelings about others. **When you do feel a need to share negative feelings, it really ought to come from a place of commitment to connection – of wanting to enter a space of truth with someone with the goal of achieving deeper understanding of them and of yourself, but without a demand for agreement or closure or even listening.** It's also very important to use “ownership language”, which I will talk about later.

Thus it is quite important to examine your own motives prior to sharing negative feelings with another person. To the extent there is any sense of “make-wrong” towards the other person, and that you are speaking to them out of a demand that they change their behavior in order to please you or ease your own suffering, or out of a desire to teach them something such as the “correct” way to behave, you need to go back to the drawing

board and find a different attitude or style of expression. **This is especially true when you feel a sense of rightness, or even “righteous indignation” about their behavior.** If you don’t do this, the other person might hear you say (and this may in fact be true), that their way of being is distressing to you, that you judge them for it and you need them to immediately stop – as opposed to your communicating your judgments of them, or anger or upset, out of a sincere desire to understand why they are being this way, so that you can (hopefully) make peace with it and return to a space of mutual caring and understanding.

In addition to the above, the fact of your having a strong reaction to someone in the nature of “righteous indignation”, along with a reduced sense of empathy towards them, points directly and irrefutably to something powerful that has been triggered in you and which you are trying to fix in them. This could be a good time to share and reflect on what’s going on for you, rather than attempting to fix them or change their behavior.

In a formal circling context with a skilled facilitator, if you’re not sure whether you’re triggered or not, or what your motive is for sharing a negative feeling, my advice would be: try sharing it anyway, and trust in the ability of the group to help you figure out what is happening. As a powerful way to invite inquiry into your experience, you can state something along the lines of “*I’m not sure what my motive is in sharing this, but it feels important*”. This is a great way to turn a confusing impulse into vulnerable leadership: “*I feel this and I want to share it but I don’t know why or even whether I should share it.*”

Sharing vulnerability and Negative Feedback: Authentic Relating on the street

When practicing Authentic Relating, such as in every-day conflict situations with people in your life, you have to be even more careful, more discerning and more disciplined about giving negative feedback.

The reason for that has already been stated: you can’t assume a person in your life who hasn’t circled, such as a house-mate or business associate, is going to have skill and commitment to explore the space of connection with you. It is possible that they are angry and blameful towards you and have little interest in investigating the connection space between the two of you, which may be non-existent from their perspective. It’s possible they just want you to change or adapt to them in order to ease their own suffering, and they may not be very receptive to your telling them that their suffering is not your problem, and that they need to take greater ownership of their feelings and communicate more responsibly if they want to be heard by you – even though all this may be “true”.

The Non-Violent Communication (NVC) model can be very helpful in cases such as this. There is a considerable overlap between Circling and NVC, with the difference that NVC does not assume or ask the other person for a commitment to connection. NVC simply assumes that the other person has “needs” – for understanding, affection, belonging, acknowledgement etc. – and then tailoring your attitude and language towards meeting those needs in them (which, hopefully, will calm them down and make them more receptive to you).

As such, NVC might be more attuned to the Authentic Relating practice.

Case Study: Sharing vulnerability through negative feedback

Let me give an example. Your housemate has been leaving dirty dishes and you feel a sense of outrage. After some introspection you track it down to this belief: “*Caring and responsible people don’t leave dirty dishes. My housemate is demonstrating that he is irresponsible and doesn’t care for me*”. Before you approach your housemate, you would be wise to consider: Is this belief really true? Have you yourself ever left dirty dishes for your mother to clean up? Are you justifying your anger towards your housemate by imagining that you are right, that there is a right way to behave, and that you have something to teach them about what’s right? What are the feelings and needs that might be alive in your housemate? Is it possible they are just overwhelmed and unhappy with their life, and doing their own dishes is difficult for them and has really nothing to do with you?

This is the kind of self-inquiry that we ought to consider prior to engaging another person in negative feedback. **Even in cases where you feel completely justified and are dealing with a minimum acceptable behavior that you need to be respected, you would still be wise to approach the other person with curiosity about them, and try to express care rather than your unspoken (covert), or even overt make-wrongs – if you want to be heard, that is.**

Sharing negative feelings with other people can be difficult under the best of circumstances. A “pure” Circling approach would be to share vulnerability, admit that you are upset and that you may not even know why: “*As I hear you speak and express your anger, I feel strong resistance to you and also feel totally unseen and disconnected from you, and it is very painful for me*”. But this is probably not a formula that you would want to try with your non-circler housemate who is attacking you for failing to do the dishes. In general, it is always tricky to challenge someone to some way of being that is different than how they are

currently showing up (maybe fuller or more true, or more loving, at least from your perspective). This is a complex topic. We will return to it in the “Communicate Responsibly” section.

Refer also to the section about withholds (in the prior chapter). You would be wise to book a withhold session with a friend or acquaintance who is not connected to the problem, *before* you engage anyone in a sensitive conversation such as this.

6. Share Impact, Offer Reflection and Inquiry

“Sharing impact” is another aspect of vulnerability. It means to let people know how they occur to you, and particularly any emotional reactions you may be having to them: joy, excitement, sadness, anxiety, tension in your body, irritation, boredom, confusion, or whatever. You will particularly want to share any strong emotions that you are having in response to them.

Sharing impact is fundamental to the process of connection. Most people want to know and are intensely curious about how they occur to others, but are often afraid of asking directly. Many people, and all of us at times, carry an ongoing internal conversation when we are relating to someone. It might go like this: *is this person liking me? Am I being appropriate here? Do they think I am smart, attractive, lovable...? Do I have bad breath? Are they noticing I forgot to brush my hair, or the stain on my shirt? Etc., etc.* The beauty and power of Circling, as opposed to traditional ways of relating, is that in Circling we seek to expose this “meta-conversation”, and we have agreement and permission to do so.

“Impact” can be anything at all that you are thinking and feeling with respect to another person, but also anything that you are imagining that they are thinking and feeling. Technically speaking, what you yourself are thinking and feeling in relation to someone, and what you imagine they are thinking and feeling, are quite different things. But in practice, the two types of sharing will occur together.

Danger zones of sharing impact and offering reflection

- It is a truism that your thoughts and feelings towards another person – let alone your imagining of what they are thinking and feeling – will be colored by your own experiences, fears and projections (and in case you are not already aware of this, Circling will cause you to learn this quite rapidly). These imaginings, or

even felt sensations, may not necessarily have any “truth” or reality to the other person, meaning that your reaction may be completely about you. This is in the nature of human relationships, that we are so frequently wrapped up in ourselves and our own experience that we do not see people accurately, and our internal reactions to others are often out of proportion to their real condition and intent. Therefore, you would be wise to be very humble in offering your feelings and perspectives to another person (maybe not all the time – there may be times that being very blunt is called for). But regardless, always attempt to use “ownership language”, and also don’t take it personally if the person is unmoved by your impact, or even responds negatively.

- It’s also possible that you may be entirely “right” in your analysis or diagnosis of somebody, or in your perception of their deeper emotions, but they won’t be ready to hear it or interested in what you have to share. **To share a reflection with someone who is not interested in what you have to say, particularly a negative reflection, is not love, it is violence.** This is not true in 100% of situations (your child may not be interested in your feelings about them playing in the street); but you can generally treat this as a firm rule in relating to adults: don’t share unwanted reflections unless you are fully owning them as your opinion and being vulnerable, i.e. communicating your distress / fear / anger / anxiety around their behavior. This relates to the important distinction between sharing a “reflection” as a judgment, versus a true vulnerable share that is not making anybody wrong. Your best bet in this kind of situation is either to say nothing at all until you get more internal clarity, or else return to vulnerable sharing, perhaps around your feeling of disconnection from this person. Also refer to the earlier section on “Authentic Relating and negative feedback” for ideas here.
- You can directly share that you have a judgment, provided that you state upfront that your judgment may not have any reality and that you present it from a desire for clarification rather than it being a truth of any kind.
- With those caveats, however, do not be timid, and particularly if you have a strong reaction to someone, either positive or negative. In general you can assume, until proven otherwise, that a person who is showing up in a circling group is going to be interested and curious about how they occur to people; more so, for instance, than a casual acquaintance might be. It’s okay to take risks in your communication.

- By the same token, if you are on the receiving end of a thought or feeling that doesn't fit for you, you can say so, or you can just let it go, knowing that when all is said and done, most anything anybody shares with you is going to be about them. Remember that by sharing yourself vulnerably, you are not only taking an opportunity to discover yourself at a deeper level, you are giving others an opportunity to discover themselves through you.

Below are some alternative formulations for skillfully sharing negative feelings with people. Note that sometimes it is quite okay to be blunt, and the power of Circling is precisely that, that it's okay to share your truth without worrying too much how the other person will respond. However, there is a thin line between "truth" and violence, as already mentioned. Use discernment, as in the following examples.

Rather than...	Try...
<i>"I am not feeling you"</i>	If you don't feel related to somebody in the circle, the most powerful approach is to try and figure out why. Because a statement such as "I am not feeling you" carries an undertone of <i>"I should be feeling you and if I am not, it's your fault"</i> . Think instead: does this person remind you of somebody in your life you have issues with? Are you just having a bad day and struggling to put real attention on anyone? What's it like to want to feel connected to someone, and not be able to? Even if the person is not "relatable" by you, the thoughts and feeling that arise in you from this experience might prove valuable. See the later section "Welcome everything" for more ideas here.

<p><i>“I feel bored hearing you talk about your mother”</i></p>	<p>Same as above: explore what it would take to deepen your experience with the other person, and/or look at your own stuff that might be coming in the way. Put some “skin in the game” (your own skin) rather than standing in judgment or indifference to them. You could try:</p> <p><i>“How are you feeling about your mother right now as you are talking?”</i> [provide genuine curiosity, bring it to the present moment]</p> <p>Or: <i>“I would like to understand what is most important for you here. Is this really what you want to talk about? What are you getting from this conversation?”</i> [gently and respectfully challenge, as well as open an inquiry]</p> <p>Or: <i>“I can’t explain it, but I have a sense that there is something you want from this conversation that you are not getting. Is this true?”</i> [Offer an inquiry, but respectfully. Because if the circlee responds “Yes this conversation is exactly what I am needing”, then you can back-off your judgment that you, and maybe everyone else as well, is bored, knowing that your attention is actually being received and appreciated. You might then become more engaged]</p>
<p><i>“Why are you so upset? It happens to everybody”</i></p>	<p>Rather than expressing a judgment or lack of resonance with somebody upfront, try and look for places of resonance, as in <i>“I felt you the most when you said...”</i>. You can always return to negative feedback later, if necessary, and this will certainly be way more impactful once the circlee feels connected to you and senses that you get their world and are on their side</p>

Offering Reflection / Inquiry

To “offer reflection and inquiry” is to ask a question that deepens a person’s process, an offer to further distinguish or articulate their felt experience; or, alternatively, to offer them something that occurs to you in your experience of them, in the hope that it will be meaningful or illuminating to them.

Offering useful reflection and inquiry to people is a core skill of circling and a quite advanced one, which can only be learned through practice. This is a complex topic and one of the reasons that people go to advanced circling trainings. Some of it may just consist of “walking through” a person’s thinking and feeling experience with them (what they have already shared) and then asking for clarification. It may also involve noticing dissonance between the circlee’s words and their non-verbals, and/or articulating feelings that arise in you which seem out-of-sync or unrelated to the circlee’s words. I will give just a few examples here, and encourage the reader to pursue some of the resources listed later. (Some of these examples are drawn from Sara Ness’s The Art of Getting Somebody’s World).

- *“You have used those words, ‘I don’t feel that anyone cares’, three times in this circle. What does that mean for you?”* [Reflect and inquire]
- *“You seem to be feeling something intense right now. I feel drawn to this. Are you willing to stay there with us?”* [Reflect, empathize, appreciate, offer to slow it down]
- *“What are you thinking about as you are looking around?”* [Bring it to the present moment]
- *“When you say ‘I don’t know’, what is going through your mind (or, how does that feel in your body)?”* [Curious and inquire]
- *“I’ve always thought you were scared of me. Is that true?”* [Vulnerable share and curiosity]
- *“When I ask how you are feeling, you seem angry, and I imagine you don’t want to be asked. Is that true?”* [Reflect, empathize, inquire]
- *“Did anyone else in the room think that he was angry?”* [Engage the room, seek other perspectives]

- *“You say you feel sad right now, but I notice you smiled after you said that. Did you notice that? What were you thinking?”* [Reflect dissonance and inquire]
- *When you hear a long explanation: “Are you afraid that we are not going to understand you?”* [Reflect, inquire]
- When the group is asking a lot of questions, and the circlee gives short responses: *“It seems that we really want to get to know you. Do you want to be known by us?”* [Reflect, gently challenge]
- *“We have touched three times on your desire to be accepted by us, but every time you say that you make a joke. Is it uncomfortable or scary for you to reveal that?”* [Reflect dissonance and inquire]
- *“What are you getting from this circle”, or “is there something shifting as you are talking?”* [Bring it back to the present moment]

Sharing impact: Authentic Relating on the street

You have to be more cautious sharing impact in Authentic Relating. In essence you have to be more discerning of what the other person is able to (or wants to) hear from you. You need to have (proportionately) more attention on them and less on yourself and your own needs than you would in a formal circle (partly because in a formal circle you will also get help from the facilitators or other participants, while in Authentic Relating you will likely be on your own and there is therefore a greater risk that you can mess up really badly).

In Authentic Relating the connection intent (or listening) may not be so strong, so you want to do your best to make sure that you are really serving truth and connection in the interaction, rather than “talking above them” or asking them to share a context which they may not have a clue about, and which they might think is ridiculous even if you tried to explain it to them. Reverting to straight-up NVC, as already described, can be quite helpful here.

7. Own Your Experience (Communicate Responsibly)

“Owning your experience” means to frame your communications more in terms of your feelings, needs and desires in relationship to another person, and less in terms of your beliefs or judgments about the person, the reasons that you think this person is the way they are, or the things they are saying which you think are wrong. This is, once again, a very complex topic which we can only brush on here. You may want to check resources in Non-Violent Communication for ideas (Google Erik Erhardt’s paper [Can we talk](#)), and also explore a modality called [Clean Talk](#), which is even more rigorous than NVC. Much of these practices involve getting internal clarity about the judgments and beliefs that underlie many of our communications, and then re-stating them from a perspective of our feelings and needs, rather than the unowned or unexpressed judgment.

Returning to the previous example: the judgment “*responsible people do their own dishes*” (or “*kind people do not talk like this*”): **even if these judgments are “true”, this won’t help you change the other person’s behavior one iota, if they disagree with you or feel attacked by you, which is probable after hearing something like this.** So, rather than coming at the person from this belief that is about your making them wrong for their behavior, you might open with a feeling statement, or even a vulnerable share, such as “*I get really irritated with you when you leave dirty dishes and then I feel disconnected from you*”; and then prepare to give empathy, at least to the extent that you are capable of it in the moment.

Some people call this “responsible communication”, and it is, unfortunately, quite rare. The normal, or “default” way that people communicate negative feelings is *virtually guaranteed* to increase reactivity on both sides and create distance. This style of communication is unlikely to further your goal, whether it be to get closer to another person, or else to get them to do something that you want, such as listen to you. You may feel momentarily better about “giving them a piece of your mind”, but in the end you will both likely be unhappy and unfulfilled.

You may even get into a cycle of reactivity with someone, of demands and counter-demands, threats and accusations, which can go on for years – when, perhaps, a direct statement of your need and simple acknowledgement of them and their need, would immediately solve the problem. This is the reason we call this type of communication “irresponsible”, but it would be just as accurate to call it “stupid

communication”: nobody is being served by it. At best, you are wasting everybody’s time and energy, including your own. Responsible communication is a tough skill to practice when we are angry and upset with someone, or judging them to be bad and wrong. We all struggle with it.

Using ownership language well is an art form, however there is a rule-of-thumb which you might want to attempt: try and make an unarguable statement – a statement that nobody can disagree with because it references your own feelings, for which you are the undisputed authority. This will not stop people from challenging you or wanting to argue with you, but it will probably decrease their reactivity and make them more receptive to you. As already noted, owning your experience is especially important when giving someone negative feedback, or sharing about something that they are doing that is distressing to you or that makes you feel more distant from them.

Ownership language: Authentic Relating on the street

In your everyday life, just as in Circling, you *will* find “difficult people” who challenge you in some way or upset you in their way of being. In communicating your anger or distress with them, you will have to be careful not to lose them completely, to the point they won’t want anything to do with you (unless that is also your intention, that you don’t want anything to do with them – but in that case why talk to them at all?).

In Authentic Relating with such people, it will sometimes be necessary to soften your impact, especially if they are also angry or upset, and/or return to empathy until they calm down sufficiently to be able to listen to you. Sometimes you will need to give up telling them everything, all the things they do which are offensive to you, in one sitting.

Nonetheless, consider this idea: that it may be better to say *something* to them rather than to say nothing at all, even if that something is quite gentle, a tiny fraction of your true feelings towards them. If you don’t say anything at all, you may well suffer for it afterwards, and therefore to be silent is being unkind towards yourself and unkind towards them (because you will continue to be upset with them, which they probably do not want, regardless of the terrible things they may be saying to you). They may really welcome an opportunity to clear the air with you, or they may be totally unaware of the negative impact they are having on you and be grateful to you for letting them know. It is very important, however, in such a case to use as full ownership language as you possibly can.

I return to this topic in the two sections below “Make Right, Not Wrong” and “Honor Yourself”.

8. Make Right, Not Wrong (Find People Right, Approve of them)

When you are reacting to someone in a negative way, and judging them wrong for how they are being, it can be helpful to take on the following perspective: **people are the way they are for a reason, they are the product of their genes and of the environment that nurtured them (or not); and consequently it is *certain* that if you were born into their body and had the experiences they had, you would behave exactly the same.**

This is sometimes referred to as “finding people right”, and is one of the most important skills that you could ever master, if you hope to be effective as a human change agent. **One of the great paradoxes of human relationships is that people change a lot faster in the direction that you want (or that they want for themselves), when they are first accepted as they are.**

Approving of other people does not mean that you will always agree with them or feel their behavior is justified. It means that you will attempt to find something to agree with, empathize or appreciate about them. This is not always easy, and in some cases you may find it impossible, but usually you will find that even a small effort in that direction will give huge dividends in dealing effectively with difficult people and interactions. At minimum, it should give you more peace of mind with regards to the situation, which holds the potential for increasing your mental clarity and designing an effective intervention, should one be necessary.

The reason that “finding people right” is so effective is that it reflects a fundamental reality of the human condition: **that none of us owns the truth, or the whole truth, of what is best for the world, for other people, or even for ourselves. “Truth” in human relationships can only be found by agreement.** Another way to say this is that “*in relationship, everyone is right*”. Taking that perspective will, in most cases, be a win for everyone, providing a fertile ground from which a positive conversation might emerge. Indeed, one of the reasons that Gandhi, Martin Luther King and other powerful world peace leaders were so effective is that they recognized the *humanity* of their opponents, even as they actively worked to unseat them and their ideas.

“*That which we resist, persists*” said Werner Erhard. “*Resist not evil*” said Jesus. Jesus offered that perspective even in matters where we might be certain that evil is present. Imagine how much *more* true that perspective

will be, in the vast majority of cases in which we really cannot be certain of what is right and wrong, good or bad?

9. Be Impactable

“Being impactable” is an advanced form of empathy and is the essence of what transformative relationship is all about. The idea here is that when people share something sensitive about themselves, they are usually not interested so much in your thoughts or judgments about their experience, whether you think they are right or wrong to be feeling and thinking as they are. But they are, usually, *very* interested in your ability to get their experience and to be moved by it. And above anything else, they will likely be *passionately* interested in anything they say which you could apply creatively to yourself, something that could brighten your world or change something in you. It is a universal human longing to want to have an impact on other people.

Let me quote Sara Ness here:

Let yourself be affected by others' experience. Empathize from your own world, remembering similar experiences or feelings in your past. Let yourself be touched by how they are showing up right now with you. Be so here that you could be destroyed by this connection – and over time, you will discover your own invincibility.

“Being Impactable”: Authentic Relating on the street

“Being Impactable” is even more effective in Authentic Relating, for the simple reason that people probably won't expect it. They may be charmed and thrilled by the fact that you have the courage to tell them how they are affecting you.

For these reasons, you may want to double-up your positive impact statements in real life and with the people in your environment. To fail to communicate positive emotional impact towards someone when it is present, is both cruel and stupid, because you could make a real difference to someone by doing so, because you could make a new friend or ally, and because it will make you happier.

10. Honor Yourself (Handling Conflict)

To “honor yourself” means to take care of yourself emotionally in your interactions with people. Specifically, it means that you do not have to do anything that doesn't feel right to you, answer any question, accept

anybody's feedback, or be any particular way, regardless of what anyone says – even a group leader. You even have an option to walk out of a group (or hit the “close” button in an online group) – I have done it once or twice myself, and I have threatened to do it many other times!

Dropping out of a group should be considered a measure of last resort, hopefully to be done only *after* you have expressed your ambivalence about what is happening, or even rage, and haven't felt heard in that; however it is always an option, and you should not judge yourself for leaving a group if you feel you have to do it, or judge anyone else for it either. Indeed in some cases it might be the responsible thing to do: better to leave the group and let yourself cool off, than to explode at them in your rage at how bad and wrong they are, or all the ways in which they are not getting your world or even putting you down.

(Note: leaving a group is controversial. What I am giving you here is my perspective on it, which may or may not be shared by others. It is very important for me personally to have choice which relationships are empowering to me and which ones are not, and not to engage with a group out of a sense of obligation. Of course if you are blowing up and leaving groups consistently, that is not a good thing and will have negative impact on people wanting to circle with you).

In practice, it is quite rare for people to leave a group in the middle. It is much more common for people to say nothing, and then feel mild to intense discomfort or anger for hours or days afterwards, and wish that they had said something. It is quite likely you will find most groups very nurturing and connecting, this is the nature of the practice and the power of coming together with connection intent. Nonetheless, conflicts *will* arise, and they can be very valuable to everyone. In many cases, a major conflict in a person's life, or in a group, can be the cause of a deep shift and growth.

As such, you would be wise to value all conflict that comes up in a group, to practice empathy and all the attitudes and skills already covered. It is likely that you will find these attitudes and skills very valuable in other aspects of your life outside of Circling. And so, what better opportunity than to practice now in Circling, when you can probably count on at least a few people in the group to “have your back” and be making an effort to understand your experience and empathize with you?

Honor Yourself: Authentic Relating on the street

In Authentic Relating someone who is attacking you and (seemingly) holding no value to “commitment to connection”, it can be very powerful for you to stay in connection with them unilaterally. It can help them be

seen in a way that they perhaps thought impossible (hence why they wanted to break the connection).

You can do this either in formal circles or else with strangers. Let me give an anecdote on the latter (from the blog of my friend Lisa Campion). This is black-belt level A/R and you may not be up for it. There is nothing wrong with walking away, either (maybe with a negative impact statement: “*I don’t like how you are talking to me and I won’t participate in this*”, or just “*I am sorry, I can’t listen to this, I need to walk away*”). You should not push yourself beyond what you have to give.

Case Study: Lisa’s story (an extraordinarily skillful example of “honor yourself”)

“The other day, I was in what could have been a parking lot rage incident. I was in the Target parking lot and I left my empty shopping cart near my car rather than take it back to the little corral. Mostly because I broke my foot and it’s in a walking cast and my foot was aching already. The cart corral suddenly looked like it was a long way away.

Then a gust of wind came along and blew the cart into a man’s very nice car. I watched it go feeling like –uh oh andding.

Instantly he became a very angry dude. He ran over to me and was really yelling, how rude, what the hell was my problem, he was on a roll, all purple in the face. He stopped when he saw my foot in the air cast. I apologized but he kept right on going. I could feel that his anger was about something else and I was just the trigger, it was so obvious. The ding had opened up his anger closet, which was full and it all overflowed.

He was projecting this all over me. Of course it is annoying to have your car dinged by a shopping cart (It didn’t even leave a mark, truthfully) but his reaction was epic, it was like an 8 out of 10 when maybe the ding was worthy of a 2.

I got very grounded and opened my heart, just as if he was a client in my office. It was an experiment to see what would happen- so I trotted out my therapy voice and said, “Yeah dude, I am really sorry, I can see how mad you are. Anyone would be angry, I totally get it. My cart totally dinged your beautiful car.”

Angry Dude: “Yeah well- You should be more responsible and less of a selfish jerk blah blah...” He was off and running again.

Me: "Yes, you are right. Should have put that back where it was supposed to go. I hate it when people are selfish jerks. That sucks." Angry Dude looked less angry. He blinked a few times. "Yeah well. Next time you should. But maybe you didn't cuz your foot is broken. I can see how maybe you didn't want to walk all the way over there. I had a really tough day at work. My boss is a selfish jerk."

Me: "Dude, that's rough. I work for myself and sometimes I can be a jerk to myself so I know what it's like having a jerky boss."

Angry Dude was no longer angry. It did take him a second to figure that one out, but he sat down on the edge of my bumper and unloaded the trials and tribulations of his life. He was going through a divorce and missed his kids. His life was in a crappy, terrible place and he was feeling lost. I love these moments when I get a chance to do some parking lot therapy so I just listened. This does happen to me on a pretty regular basis and I actually enjoy connecting and listening to people. After a while I said to him that maybe it was a chance to reconstruct his life and what did he think he needed to do to reconnect with his kids and get support for himself? But mostly I just listened.

Eventually, he stood up and said he was glad I bumped into him. (He had a good sense of humor under all that rage!) We shared a handshake and then even a quick hug."

11. Welcome Everything

The previous section "Honor yourself" describes the more extreme case of "Welcoming everything", which is accepting that conflict will occasionally arise in a group, and as such it is better to welcome what is already present than to resist it (a strategy which is valuable in all human relationships, incidentally). In most cases, however, your reactions and feelings will be less dramatic than presented earlier: boredom, tensions in your body, mild irritation, slight confusion, or distracting thoughts such as "what am I doing here" or "rats, I forgot to take out the garbage" or "this is stupid, I would much rather be painting my nails right now". To "welcome everything" means to accept whatever thoughts and feelings are arising in the moment as, perhaps, something valuable, something which carries the potential for insight or an interesting and transformative conversation.

Another way of saying this, is to consider the possibility that everything that is happening inside of you in relation to the group is "an excuse for intimacy": meaning that you are in a process of self-discovery, and other-

discovery, in a way that is quite mysterious and that *all* of your feelings, no matter how unrelated they may seem, are contributing to that. Furthermore, you can't really avoid these feelings anyway, so you would be wise to surrender to them (see the final section "Surrender Gracefully"). For instance: you might *imagine* that you would be having more fun painting your nails, or washing dishes; and you may be right; but since you have chosen to spend an hour in a circling group, you may as well get as much out of the experience as you can.

This is the aspect of Circling that has been spoken of as "inter-subjective meditation". In classical meditation, you are noticing thoughts and sensations and your internal reactions of attraction and aversion to these sensations, while attempting to not get over-attached or over-invested one way or the other. Ideally, in classical meditation you are taking the perspective that these thoughts and feelings are merely "interesting" – rather than good, bad, completely stupid or life-changing insights. In other words, you are "taking it all lightly". In Circling, the invitation is to do the same: take it all lightly. Trust that whatever truth or falseness, enlightenment or stupidity, will be revealed to you at the right time. In the meantime, your job is merely to pay attention.

It can be frustrating to have to wait for clarity when things don't make sense right away. But experience shows that events that didn't connect up neatly while you were circling, still seem to have a capacity to teach you the lessons they contained, even days or weeks or months later. All you need in the moment is to trust in your self's ability to record and process things in its own time and pace.

It is particularly important to understand and accept that when you are having a strong reaction to someone, either positive or negative, that ultimately it is all about you. Thus, while you might think that you are reacting to someone because of how they are being, and this may be "true" from an ordinary perspective, it would be equally true to say that you are reacting to someone because of something in you that is resonating with them, either positively or negatively. Taking that perspective will help you see *all* the people in your life as a gift to you, since they are helping you gain self-awareness and discrimination – no matter how stupid and irritating they may seem at times.

12. Slow Down

We live in a culture which generally values performance and achievement more than it values "being", relatedness, or genuine aliveness and emotional connection. Many of us, including myself, carry this valuing of

speed over connection into our Circling groups. We talk fast, process things fast, are driven to make our point, fill the space, communicate our deepest truth and get it all done as quickly as possible – even when, ironically, what is trying to “get done” here is connection and transformation, things which don’t respond well to time pressure. We may fear that if we miss the opportunity to self-express, right now, those few precious minutes of attention and air-time that we are offered will be wasted.

This fear of slowing down is actually not a rational fear, when our intention is connection and depth. Indeed, often the first thing that needs to happen to deepen a group conversation is simply to *start taking our time*. We can choose to appreciate the unfolding mystery of connection as it’s happening, more than our desire to fulfill our communication and “transformation” agenda, no matter how urgent or compelling it might seem to us.

So what does “slowing down” look like? It is generally very simple, such as talking more slowly, or not at all, while noticing body sensations or the quality of our connection to others. We slow down, essentially, in order to feel more. A lot of people have trouble feeling and talking at the same time. The solution in such cases is often to talk less, while still holding attention on the person who is being circled. Silence is not a bad thing.

In a group with a skilled facilitator you will probably, at some point, hear some direction such as: *“pause there for a moment. I want to feel into this”*, or *“pause there, I don’t want to miss this moment”*. This can be considered a gift: people are giving us feedback about a moment of truth or authentic connection which we would entirely miss, if we were to continue in the bulldozer action and relentless flow of our thoughts, the ceaseless internal processing that may dominate our life outside of Circling, and perhaps life in the 21st century in general.

To note, however, that having a communication or transformation agenda is *not* in itself a bad thing. Most of us do have some kind of agenda, a need of some kind, no matter how much we are, or pretend to be, all-accepting and open to everything and “spiritual”. There is actually a kind of unavoidable tension in Circling, and maybe in all human relationships, between: on the one hand, fulfilling our personal agendas; and on the other hand, being in the moment, in service to others, and “surrendering to ‘what is’”. We already spoke about this in the earlier section, “The Yin and the Yang of Circling”.

13. Surrender Gracefully

I conclude this section of best practices with perhaps the greatest and hardest skill of all: the art of graceful surrender.

To “surrender” means, in its best form, one of two things. The personal meaning of “surrender” is to accept the fact that we are a certain way and feel certain things, and to stop fighting with ourselves about that, to stop *“the war of sub-personalities”*. This could also be called *“surrendering to the inevitable”*, in that most of us have little or no control over our feelings (although, paradoxically, in the act of acceptance of all our feelings, no matter how crazy or “dysfunctional” we imagine them to be, they often transform into something else or recede into the background).

The second aspect of “surrender” is in relation to other people, and it simply means: **Stop trying to change people or argue with them, and accept them as they are. You may even simply decide to do what they want you to do, for their sake, even though it may not be something you need or want for yourself.**

Why would you do this? Because, as the saying goes, *you may decide that it is more important for you to be happy than to be right*. You may make a choice for the higher good.

Graceful (or true) surrender is distinct from “submission” or “appeasement” or even “sacrifice”. You are not giving in to demands which you may perceive as selfish and stupid, simply because other people have power over you, or because you want them to shut up and leave you alone. True surrender is *voluntary*. You are offering yourself in service. Graceful surrender is an act of love.

In practice, the difference between graceful surrender and appeasement will take some discernment. You may still be feeling reactive or upset towards the other person; but, ideally, your surrender should give you *some* inner peace and serenity. You will feel a sense of power and self-nurturing in the choice to surrender.

One of the most important acts of surrender that you can do has already been described: it is “finding people right”. It is quite ironic that finding people right is actually one of the toughest forms of surrender: ironic because it costs us nothing but our pride, the recognition that other people’s truth is just as valid to them, as our truth is to us; and hence our judgment of them as wrong has no reality to it. Often we are more attached to “being right” than we are attached to our money, our health, or even our life.

Conclusion

Well-done! You have now completed your “Authentic Relating basic training”. Practicing these principles will give you a leg-up in all of your human relationships, and also make you a happier person. Formal Circling groups are a (relatively) safe space in which to practice the skills of connection.

In the next Part 2 of this book, we circle back to cultural and developmental trauma, what makes this work so difficult (and so important).

And then, in Part 3 we return to problems in practical emotional communication.

PART 2: CULTURAL TRAUMA, CULT PSYCHOLOGY, AND INTEGRAL 2ND TIER CONSCIOUSNESS EMERGENCE

Note: this ends the completed parts of the book. Following chapters are just ideas / place-holders

**Chapter xxx: Trauma is good for you:
Developmental trauma and human psycho-
spiritual development**

**Chapter xxx: The pervasiveness of Cult
Psychology, and what you can do about it.
Neurosis as failed adaptation**

**Chapter xxx: Integral Psychology, Spiral
Dynamics, and Circling**

**Chapter xxx: You are not alone: you are part of
the worldwide emergence of Integral 2nd tier
consciousness (lead, follow, or get out of the
way)**

PART 3: REVISITING EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION: MORE TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Chapter xxx: All relationships are projections (grin and bear it)

Chapter xxx: Own your characterology: Get to know it and befriend it (there are NO bad characterologies, there is only unconsciousness; with one notable exceptions)

Chapter xxx: Dealing with your family: In relationship, everyone is right (teach only love, and when you can't, walk away)

Chapter xxx: the Authentic Relating cheat-sheet: Double your appreciations, surrender/apologize gracefully, and stop trying to be right (easy-peasy. Everything else is gravy)

Chapter xxx: You are probably, at times, a dick (or an asshole or a bitch): Don't make yourself wrong for it, but don't ignore it either

Chapter xxx: Life is difficult: Get over it (you don't choose your karmic role and destiny)

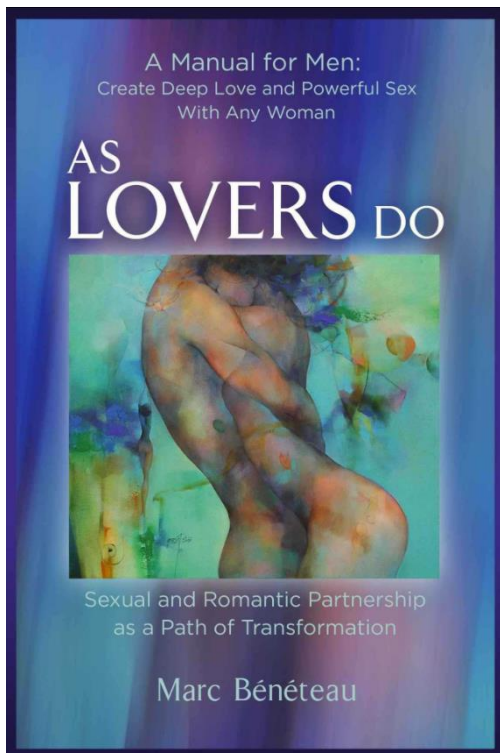
Conclusion: Next steps?

APPENDIX A: Authentic Relating Organizations and Resources

[todo – see the Circling Guide website www.circlingguide.com for now]

APPENDIX B: Other books by Marco

As Lovers Do: Sexual and Romantic Partnership as a Path of Transformation



[As Lovers Do](#) is both a profound analysis of the issues that stop men and women from getting along, *and* a practical guide for creating deeper relationships and having better sex. Starting with the basic idea that men's natural role and deepest desire is to support women, take care of them and attempt to make them happy – an idea that is frequently ridiculed and denied in our post-conventional society, which pretends that men and women are the same – we then review new models and distinctions on sexual relationships which carry the potential to dramatically improve the quality of our intimate relationships, and even to end patriarchy as we know it.

Some of the wise and powerful teachers whose ideas are reviewed are: **Scott Peck** and **Jerry Jud** on human loving; **David Deida**, **Victor Baranco** and **Alison Armstrong** on sexual polarity, sacred sexuality and female orgasm; **Marshall Rosenberg**, **Dale Carnegie** and **Werner Erhard** on emotional communication; **Mark Manson** and **Steve Bodansky** on sexual attraction and seduction; and **Dieter Duhm** on internalized oppression. Some of these great teachers are still alive, others have passed-on; all of them built significant learning communities; but [As Lovers Do](#) is the *only* summary and integration of these powerful ideas into a comprehensive system for understanding man/woman relationships. If you don't know who these teachers are, and why their ideas are important, you are in for an eye-opening experience!

Sexual intimacy is one of the deepest human needs, and yet the one that is most frequently repressed and denied – doubly so as men and women

often repeatedly act out self-destructive patterns in pursuit of their sexual and relational needs. We do this, mostly, out of ignorance, attempting to follow social norms that are broken and lead to poor results. In reality, relating powerfully to the opposite sex is a lot easier than most people imagine, once you get the basic ideas which are presented here.

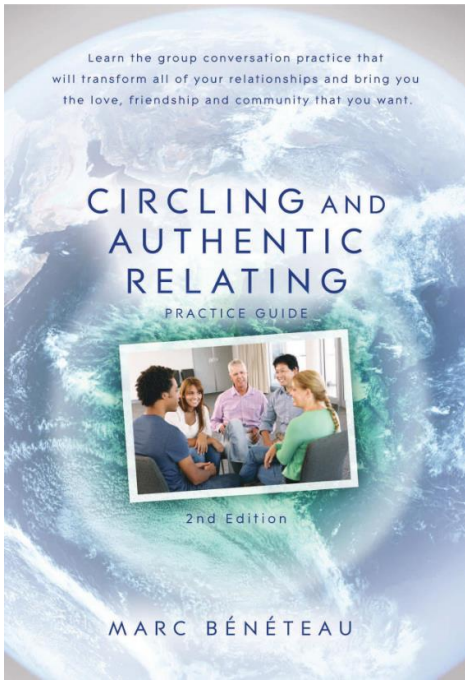
Note: the book is written from a male perspective and therefore should be of particular interest to young men, who are often shockingly and tragically ignorant about women. However, there is wisdom here for people of all ages and genders.

A few reviews:

“While the popular culture is still sending couples into “couples counselling” and using the medical model to pathologize one or both members of a couple who are struggling, there has been a plethora of new thought about how to actually SUCCEED at relationship. Mark has been a student of these new pioneers for at least 20 years, and has essentially written THE survey text book about this body of new thought.” – Max Rivers, Marriage Counselor & NVC Facilitator

“This book unites some of the best ideas that have been developed by modern day experts in the fields of sexuality and relationship. Marco has chosen the best information from each to enable the reader to evaluate and create a better relationship with a partner, the world and with one's self. He gives you enough time with each master to get the main ideas that they have described, allowing us to delve further if we so wish by including many references. After reading this book I felt better, more aware, more in love and kinder to myself, my lover and to my friends.” – Steve Bodansky, Sex Educator, Bestselling Author of “Extended Massive Orgasm” and 3 other books.

Circling and Authentic Relating Practice Guide



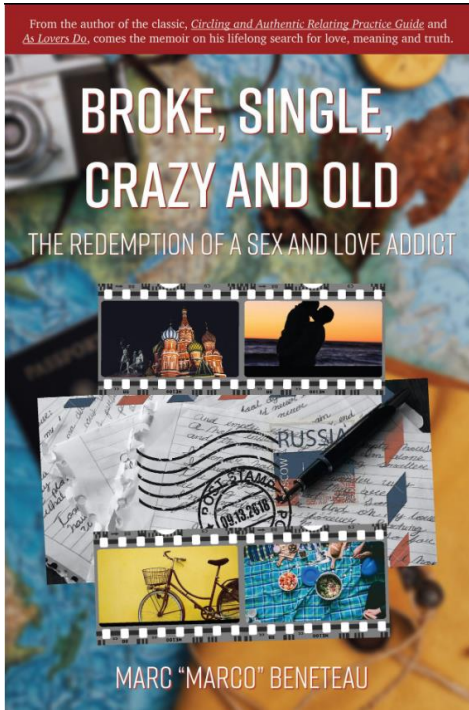
Circling is a group conversation practice, and part of a rapidly-growing worldwide movement called "Authentic Relating". It is a unique developmental practice that is about "getting somebody's world", being seen and accepted for who we really are, and feeling connected to other human beings and part of a larger whole. Circling may also be our best modern-day hope for creating a kinder and gentler society, one that would be less polarized and more attuned to real human needs. And on top of all this, Circling is super-fun and very affordable!

The Circling and Authentic Relating Practice Guide is the most comprehensive digital resource

available on the Authentic Relating movement. In addition to a practice guide with many examples of what to do and say in groups, it also contains a history of the movement, a section on precursors (which include Integral theory, Non-Violent Communication, and "we-space"), an extensive resources section, sample leader formats, and instructions for starting your own groups, either in person or online.

Note: this 2nd Edition has been updated and expanded. containing a new introduction, expanded chapters on Circling contexts, and a description of the powerful practice practice of Mastermind Circling.

Broke, Single, Crazy and Old: The Redemption of a Sex and Love Addict



If you like sexual autobiographies in the style of Erica Jong and Henry Miller, then you will certainly enjoy this deeply vulnerable, real-life love story. The central part relates to two women the author was in love with between 1993 and 1999, one of them in his local community in Montreal and the other in Russia, and the ensuing love triangle, which nearly destroyed him. The story includes excerpts of the love- (and hate!) letters, which are beautifully written, and so you get to know the minds and hearts of the character's lives in an almost voyeuristic way. You can read that part separately if you like, it's in the section called "Epoch 4: Ellen and Sasha".

More than the love story, however, the author shares his most honest

reflections on his development from the "relational idiot" of little empathy that he was, into the wisdom of his later years, leading to his "redemption". Many men deserve the scorn thrown at them by women due to their selfishness and lack of empathy, which oftentimes comes from an honest struggle to relate. It's wonderful to witness the growth and self-reflection that he goes through as someone challenged with mental health issues, addictions, and autism. This book will create understanding between men and women and document the lifelong development of a true seeker of love, connection, and community.

The book is part memoir, part cultural critique, and part self-help manual. The latter relates to some profound but little-known teachings on love, sexuality, and man/woman psychology, discovered through the author's 20-year deep dive into the human potential movement. It is for anyone who wonders if their life has value, who struggles with relationships and mental health, and who agrees with David Deida that "sex is a short-cut to God". Ultimately, it is a testament to the transformational power of telling one's story. Because, aren't we all just a little bit crazy?