In this quarterly update, we’re excited to share transformative stories and experiences that highlight the profound impact of healing circles in our communities. Through the power of storytelling, we’ll take you on a journey of healing, resilience, and connection as we explore the ways in which healing circles make a difference in the lives of individuals and groups.

From personal anecdotes of growth and self-discovery to testimonials of community support and solidarity, these stories serve as a testament to the profound healing that occurs when individuals come together in a safe and supportive space.

Join us as we celebrate the power of human connection and the ripple effects of compassion and empathy through the stories of those whose lives have been touched by healing circles.

With love and gratitude,

Lindsay Espejel
Co-director
Healing Circles Global

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Lifting the veil and encountering Truth

You wouldn’t think a 37-square-mile area inhabited by 11,055 people would feel like a small town, but Vashon Island does—especially for someone like Gail Labinski. During her decades as a teacher, she has watched many an islander grow up and fledge.

Circles have been a recurring theme in Gail’s life. She praises and supports an organization of young men on the island called Journeymen, which offers nature-based rites of passage and mentoring for boys within the public schools.

“At a Journeyman training I witnessed, a group of high school boys modeled a circle for us fishbowl style, with the boys forming a circle within a circle of observers,” says Gail.

“These were kids I knew from first grade on. I carried their stories. I knew their vulnerabilities. I knew everything that hadn’t worked for them all the way through their time in our school district. And here they were, coming in on a weekend to model a circle in which I saw those same vulnerabilities become strengths.

“These young men demonstrated leadership, compassion, openness, and an honesty that was breathtaking. Having cared and advocated for them since they were very young, I finally got to witness something that clearly worked. That circle I witnessed was eye-opening for me.”

After Gail retired, she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Fellow Vashon Islander, Charlie Pieterick had also just retired and volunteered to host a healing circle for Gail and her family.

“We sat at the kitchen table with Charlie and it was the first time my son talked about it,” Gail says.

“We spend a lot of time turning our faces away from death, but there it was sitting on my kitchen table, a deeply authentic moment for each of us. It was beautiful. That deeper Truth is always there, but there are so many things blocking our view of it as we barrel on in life.” Gail continues.

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The circle gave my family this moment to lift the veil and all be in whatever it was we were in: raw, open, and together. When you have a moment like that, you have an opportunity to transform. I think that’s when transformation occurs: when it’s safe enough, you’re open enough, and it’s important enough to not look away. And the thing is, when you take that opportunity to face the fear, the shift that occurs is nourishing, it lightens the load.”

Gail turned out to be one of the lucky ones. “It’s been five years now, and the numbers continue to look good. Whatever time I’ve got left has to mean something,” she says. Mentored by Charlie, she is now part of a team of four people who cohost a monthly circle in her home.

“In daily life, you don’t always have opportunities to reflect, to look inside, to see who you’ve become,” says Gail. “I believe in circles. I’ve seen the benefits in myself, in my students, and in my community. I’m committed to providing and supporting the circle opportunity in any way I can.”
In search of authenticity

Despite being born into a male-dominated environment, Charlie Pieterick wound up in a profession dominated by women.

“I grew up in a flat above a tavern owned by my father,” Charlie says. “I was immersed in a very patriarchal culture, both because I was raised in the Catholic church and schools, and because I often had to help out at the bar where men were the principal clientele.”

After graduating from high school, Charlie attended a Catholic college in St. Paul, Minnesota, which is where the journey that would eventually lead him to healing circles began.

“Early in my undergraduate career, I volunteered at the St. Paul Catholic Youth Center and served as a peer counselor for high school students,” Charlie says. “They trained us in active listening, supportive feedback, and other principles of group facilitation that intrigued me.”

Some of his fellow trainees said the training resembled what they were learning in their nursing program, which piqued Charlie’s interest. His men’s college didn’t have a school of nursing, but the women’s college down the road did, so he enrolled, becoming one of only two men in the program.

“Nursing fit me like a glove,” Charlie says. “I identified with the nursing profession and, in that respect, I also became aware of the way women’s roles are undervalued in our society.”

After graduating, Charlie started working at Harborview, a Level 1 trauma center that also serves the culturally and economically diverse populations of the Seattle area and beyond.

“There, I got interested in pathophysiology and also in the day–to–day contact with patients who were so different from the people I had grown up around,” Charlie says. “Seeing how their lived experience affected their disease and suffering was a source of constant wonder for me.”

Years later, as he approached retirement, Charlie participated in a healing circles training for nurses led by Kelly and Diana Lindsay.

“It was transformative to be in that circle,” says Charlie. “I came out inspired to do something with circles. My nursing education trained me to lead therapy groups. I had participated in therapy groups myself, but some of them felt unsafe to me. I sometimes felt exposed and ‘performative’ rather than authentic, and the ego of the leaders sometimes became part of the circle.

“In healing circles, the agreements provide important guardrails and, in my experience, people feel safe when everyone abides by those agreements. There’s an equality and honesty there that doesn’t exist in a lot of therapy groups because, in healing circles, the host and guardian are peers and share their own vulnerabilities.

“I’ve often heard Diana Lindsay say that the people who benefit most from healing circles are the volunteer hosts and guardians who facilitate them,” Charlie continues. “I couldn’t agree more. I’ve healed some of my own past traumas and deepened my understanding of myself by being in circles as a host and guardian. The intentionality of facilitating circles has spilled over into all the other relationships in my life, enabling me to become more present with others and grow as a more authentic human being.”
The benefits of persistence

For Serita Winthrop, one of the best things about being a co-host for Healing Circles Global was that it gave her an opportunity to serve others from home. At 80, she struggled with the technology involved, especially Zoom, but she persisted. She co-hosted the healing circle named Coming Together 10 with Cary Zavala for several years and continues to participate as a member.

Serita has participated in other healing circles as well and is most impressed by how much it helps those who are isolated. “The connections we make in our circles are strong and it’s clear that members deeply appreciate the structure that makes it a safe place to share honest feelings.”

Serita’s experience as a volunteer and circle member inspired her to become a donor. She’s a friend of Commonweal co-founder Michael Lerner, which is how she first heard about HCG. “It’s an honor to be a part of healing circles,” she says. “I’m convinced that it’s serving such a huge need. We’re creating community in these circles.”

Decades ago, when Serita was a social worker, she founded a group for young mothers that met in her home. After they were recently reunited at a wedding, seven members of the original group decided to meet monthly via Zoom. But 26 years later, they now share the challenges of parenting adult children in their twenties. Thanks in part to her experience as a co-host and member of her Coming Together circle, Serita is able to joyfully lead this support group once a month.

“We all need support during these turbulent times,” Serita says. “Having a community of caring people is a big help. I’m enormously grateful to Diana Lindsay and Susanne Fest for all the work that they’ve done to create this extraordinary way to be of service. I really love being a part of Healing Circles Global.”

Finding My Tribe

An excerpt from a monologue by Lisa Peacock about the tribe she found in her Living with Cancer circle

I need to build my own support network.
- The young neighbours who walk our dog Maude
- The NHS volunteer who’s in a rock band drives me to and from the hospital in their van
- The friend who gives me bees wax lip balm with kind messages—‘bee happy’
- The friend who secretly cut my hair in her back garden during the pandemic so I can feel some sense of control
- The group of friends who walk with me on the moors where I have a healing encounter with a wild pony

When the treatment is over, I find a new tribe that allows me to realize and express my grief, teaches me to listen and not solve, and to be a part of, not separate from. People experiencing cancer: this is my tribe. These are the people I gather around the fire with—OK, it’s Zoom—and tell stories of life and loss. It’s the place where the ice around my heart—the emotional numbing from the trauma—begins to melt.

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