



Expressive arts: Medicine for the soul

When creativity meets connection, it becomes a potent medicine that revitalizes the spirit, awakens the senses, and strengthens the bonds between us.

In this issue, we're celebrating the vibrant energy of expressive arts circles, each of which brings a unique and innovative spark to the Healing Circles Global format. From movement and music to visual arts and creative writing, these circles offer a pathway to deepen our practices of attunement and deep listening. They invite us to come home to our body, mind, and spirit, nurturing the mind-body connection and enriching the shared experience of healing together.

You'll learn more about how art facilitates healing in these circles:

- **Writing from the Heart:** where participants spend time away from their screens to write, and then return to share the insights they gained
- **Expressive Arts:** where circle members take time to write, move, or vocalize in solitude, and then reunite to share what that activity inspired
- **Song:** where participants experience the healing benefits of singing together, but also have time to pursue whatever creative process they choose before returning to share
- **HeART of Body:** where circle members blend movement, breathwork, self-massage, and meditation into a practice of renewal

Whether you're a participant or host in a healing circle, we hope this issue inspires new ways to facilitate self-discovery and healing.

Lindsay

Lindsay Espejel
Co-director
Healing Circles Global



Writing from the Heart

"Writing begins your path to healing."

Dr. David Hanscom

by Catherine Dussault

I truly believe that writing and healing are intertwined—I've personally experienced it and, as one of the hosts of the Writing from the Heart circle, I've had the privilege of witnessing it in others.

My initial love of writing came as a flow of consciousness. I was encouraged to sit in meditation and arrive in that calm space where thoughts arise and fall like clouds, attend to my breath, and then pick up a journal and simply write from that place. What often arose were beautifully profound messages in a language that was outside my daily expressions and vocabulary. I have several journals full of these writings that date back to 1989. I see them not only as beautiful writings and poems but as lessons and reminders of my journey through life.

Writing from the Heart evolved as an invitation for others to tap into a similar experience within the healing circles framework, which cultivates grounding and safety. Often, what circle members write involves adverse life or traumatic experiences that they may hesitate to share in a traditional talk-focused circle.

Several participants have said that these circles have had a profound impact on their lives.

I was exposed to the health and neurological benefits of writing after a severe back injury in 2015. I had the good fortune to meet [Dr. David Hanscom](#), a well-known orthopedic surgeon at Swedish Hospital in Seattle at the time. I had undergone a new, minimally invasive back procedure at the University of Washington with a brilliant neurosurgeon and was working with a physical therapist who introduced me to Dr. Hanscom. At our first meeting, he pronounced, "Expressive writing changes your brain and addresses your pain."

Inspired by him and my own experience, I continued researching, reading, and digesting all that I could



about the positive impacts of writing on the brain and overall health.

In the early stages of our collective experience with the 2020 COVID lockdowns, I was asked to become one of the early hosts for HCG. I was hesitant, a bit reluctant to learn new technology, and skeptical about whether it was possible to interact deeply with people online. However, these feelings quickly dissolved when I saw the power of the HCG training methodology, which cultivates a container of safety, deep listening, connection, and a mysterious magic. I was hooked!

I was then called to support the first writing circle hosted by another volunteer, and after that series ended, I was inspired to start "Writing from the Heart," which launched in mid-September 2021. Over time, my co-hosts and I found the perfect balance between the group-based healing circle methodology and private time to write.

These circles are unique from other HCG talking circles because the simple act of writing stimulates multiple facets of our brains, a process that is described in greater detail by Dr. Hanscom, [studies](#), and [articles](#). By enhancing brain structures, chemicals, hormones, and other neurological functions, writing facilitates healing. It's an excellent way to stimulate new neural pathways for our self-care.

The Writing from the Heart circle is a community made up of people from around the globe who are now deeply bonded and connected. I've learned so much and feel so deeply held by them! Whether the faces I see are new or familiar, this circle remains committed to nurturing co-creation, compassion, connection, and resilience.



How we incorporate writing into our healing circle

- The circle begins with a check-in, often with a theme related to the poem we read to stimulate the writing experience.
- We then bring in silence with the bell and incorporate a short grounding meditation.
- We use PowerPoint slides to read the agreements, and then incorporate a poem and image, which is read by the host, guardian, and/or one of the participants.
- We may offer writing prompts or simply invite the participants to "write what's on their heart today." We leave the poem/prompts on screen, and then invite participants to go off-screen with their audio muted to write in their own personal space for 15-20 minutes (most prefer 20).
- The guardian tracks the time and rings a bell two minutes before the end of the writing period.
- We return to the screen for the heart-share, during which participants can share their writings, the process of writing, what's on their heart, or simply sit and witness. All is welcome.
- Participants honor and acknowledge what's shared with simple gestures of hands over hearts, the universal gesture of prayer hands, a simple bow of the head, or the guardian rings a bell and says, "This bell is for you, [name]."
- If there is sufficient time, the hosts will also share. (If not, the hosts remain online after the circle ends to share among themselves or other participants who wish to stay.)
- After participants have shared what's on their hearts, we invite a short harvest (a few words) of what we are taking away from the circle to sustain us until our next circle.
- Our closing may incorporate the host weaving a tapestry of words from the harvest into a short expression of the whole, then blowing out the candle and ringing a final bell.



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Ode to my circle sisters

by Catherine Dussault

Written during a Writing from the Heart circle and inspired by Robert Longley's poem titled "Connection"

I sit, I pause, I breathe... in and out.
Into the bell, then silence...
Deep Listening.

Memories flood my senses of circle stories shared,
of emotions the color of the rainbow,
all forms, all feelings,
all experiences are welcome here.
A reminder in this space we are not physical
we are virtual,
in our own physicality,
yet we are connected by heartbeats,
resonating to each other,
by threads of mycelium networks
grounding each other,
by star constellations
guiding each other.

We create and open all possibilities to stand,
to heal, to grow.

Surrounded in nature, my physical space here,
connected into the bird sounds,
look up to see your beautiful faces scattered in
different places.

Now sensing into sound...
Bird song, Your song, My song, Bell song,
All singing together.

Feeling the oneness.
Feeling the joy.
Feeling the grief.
Feeling the gratitude.

Healing my heart.
Healing my body.
Healing my mind.
Healing my soul.

Deepening engagement through the expressive arts

by Jackie Fowler

Discovering healing circles was one of the best gifts I've ever received, coming at a point in my life when I deeply needed a caring, authentic, and creative community. I'd had a long career in higher education, flourishing in a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation. Sadly, when the leadership changed, so did our foundation of support and trust. After a few years of hoping things would improve, I felt I had to resign, leaving me distrustful of organizations in general and unsure of my place in the world.

Soon after, just as the global pandemic was taking hold in 2020, my friend Maureen asked if I wanted to join her in learning an online approach to group engagement called Healing Circles. Now, after five years of learning, experimenting, and practicing within the Healing Circles Global organization, Maureen and I are happily co-hosting a monthly expressive arts circle. I've found an inspirational home within the HCG community and a vibrant cohort of friends on the Expressive Arts (EA) team.

The intention of expressive arts circles is the same as all other healing circles: to provide a safe, respectful, and confidential environment in which participants can explore and share their inner thoughts and feelings without feedback, advice, or comment. The difference is that expressive arts circles calls on members to tap into their creative/imaginative capacity for exploring their personal stories as well as our shared humanity. Participants are invited to use the different "languages" of expression: the imaginative or creative modalities that go beyond the extemporaneous speaking that's typical of most healing circles. These somatic practices, in turn, stimulate the use of metaphor, imagination, and spontaneity.

For example, as a prelude to the heart-share round, we invite participants to take 20 minutes offline (with



Photo by Jackie Fowler
Words and images that Jackie created during expressive arts circles

their audio muted and video off) to explore the offered prompt through drawing, writing, moving, vocalizing – whatever mode(s) they choose in that moment. Typically, participants will draw, paint, or write in response to the prompt (often in combination). Sometimes they choose to walk in their garden or engage in a mindfulness meditation. With the sound of a bell, we're called back into our communal space, where we share whatever we experienced or discovered. People are welcome to read or show what they've created, share the process of their exploration and what that revealed, or share the insights, thoughts, and emotions that arose for them during that time. Everyone is welcome to pass if they choose, or ask for "silence between two bells," during which we simply sit in silent solidarity with the sharer.

Beyond the personal experience of engaging in the expressive arts, our EA circles illuminate both the diversity *and* commonality of our collective thoughts and expressions; we all hear and see the same prompt on the Zoom screen, yet the time we spend alone in expressive exploration reveals vastly diverse perspectives that, through sharing, reveal a complex and often poignant whole. Therein lie the threads that connect us as a healing community.

There are thousands of books, articles, workshops, and videos addressing the theory and practice of expressive (or creative) arts methods, most viewed through the lenses of psychotherapy, medicine, or social action. Here, though, I'd like to share a few things that we, as healing circle co-hosts, can implement to invite a bit of creative embodiment into the traditional four-round circle format.

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Deepening engagement with warm-ups

Warming up is as important for creative reflection as it is for physical exercise; each round of a healing circle can be a warm-up for the next round. When participants are warmed up to explore more deeply, they feel safer and more spontaneous in their exploration. For example, as a warm-up to the heart-share prompt [Small Kindnesses](#), I asked participants to check in during the welcome round with a “small kindness” they had witnessed or experienced recently.

Connecting check-in and check-out prompts

We can also develop check-in prompts that gently tap into memory or sensation and warm up to the somatic experience that precedes heart-sharing. Relating check-in and check-out questions to each other helps bring the experience full circle for participants.

For example:

- Check-in: If you could invite someone to share this circle with you today, who would it be, and why would you like them to be here with you?
- Check-out: Remember the person you invited to share the circle with you today? How do they feel now that they’ve shared this experience with you?
- Check-in: If we were able to share a potluck meal in our circle today, what would you want to contribute and why?
- Check-out: How was the potluck we shared today? Is there a particular “taste” you’d like to take home with you?

Sparking spontaneity through free-writing

Free-writing is a timed, stream-of-consciousness writing strategy that can be very effective in transitioning from one round to the next, allowing each person a few quiet minutes to reflect on what they’ve experienced thus far, or warm up to the next prompt. (It can be reassuring for participants to know that the writing is for their own self-exploration, with no expectation of sharing what they’ve written.)

I hope these ideas have sparked your imagination and creativity, and that you’ll explore ways to invite expressive techniques into your own circles. If you’d like more ideas or mentoring, please [contact us](#).



Photo by Catherine Dussault

Canda performs a sound bath for the expressive arts team during a retreat held on Whidbey Island

Healing through song

by Petra Martin

Healing circles traditionally center around talking, but did you know that singing can reduce stress, stimulate the immune system, increase pain tolerance, foster a sense of belonging, enhance memory in people with dementia, ease grief, and improve mental health?

Musician Canda Lambert knows how impactful music can be and hosts a monthly song circle because of it. The circle is structured in much the same way that other healing circles are, except that, in addition to talking, people also sing.

Canda begins by reading the agreements and inviting people to check in. Then she screen-shares lyrics, opens her mic, plays her guitar, and leads circle members in song. With their microphones muted, circle members sing along and, because no one hears them, being able to carry a tune is *not* required.

To prepare for each circle, Canda spends a day deciding on a theme, choosing and learning songs, and creating the slides that contain each song’s lyrics.

“I usually pick a topic like lovingkindness or soul nourishment,” she says, “Or I choose a theme like Celtic songs, or songs from the seventies. The songs are healing, positive, and have a good message to them. I’ve had circle members from Australia, France, the Middle East, and England, and I try to pick songs that people are at least somewhat familiar with.”

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A fast song at the beginning of the circle brings up people's energy and gets them smiling, then the pace slows down to more heartfelt songs and ends with a verse or chorus that sometimes serves as the prompt for people's heart-share and harvest.

"When people come together, their brain waves are initially out of sync, but singing together causes their brain waves to synchronize," says Canda.

"The purpose of the songs is to form a whole," she continues. "You can see everybody singing, and the music helps form the group. We feel that entrainment on Zoom, and at the end of five songs, we come into coherence."

After singing together for a while, circle members step away from their screens and engage in writing, drawing, movement, or another form of self-expression for 10 or 15 minutes. Then they come back together and share.

In a recent circle, Canda used quotes from poet John O'Donohue's book, [Beauty, the Invisible Embrace](#), as a prompt for reflection, including:

"When we experience the Beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming."

Canda says, "Our relationship with music begins as embryos, when our cells begin to beat in unison. This unifying beat continues throughout our lives. Humans are instinctively drawn to music, rhythm, and dancing."

In the song circle, music brings participants home to their bodies and helps them find a sense of belonging in a group.

[Sing along to Canda's song about healing circles!](#)

Please note: Healing circles are built on the authenticity of those who host them—with hosts bringing their unique voice, personal perspective, and lived experience to the space. Healing Circles hosts and guardians are independent circle organizers. Their statements, opinions, and impressions are their own and do not represent the views of Healing Circles Global or Commonweal.



Zooming in on the practice of self-care

by Cynthia Clough

The embodiment movement has urged us all to shut down our screens and get outside, connect with nature, and reclaim the physical activities and somatic therapies that foster integration of mind/body/soul. Too much screen time turns us into talking heads with attention deficits and countless issues with body alignment and circulation due to our frozen postures before devices. And yet, since the pandemic and the boom of online gathering, a lovely paradox has been emerging: more and more students of somatic practices are finding opportunities to study with master teachers online and go deeper than ever with embodiment work. As Healing Circles Global has expanded its online presence, circle hosts have sought more effective ways to embrace this paradox.

After I was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer, I turned to HCG mostly for cancer support. At the time, I was studying energy healing in Turin, Italy, with my mentor from the Barbara Brennan School, who urged me to practice medical Qigong and find a good teacher. I lived in the hills of Turin and did not drive. After surgeries and chemo, I was not keen on the bumpy bus trek into the city in pursuit of a teacher, but I had good books and YouTube videos that I thought would help, and they did in a limited way.

Mostly, my reading convinced me that Qigong was an important path in whatever kind of healing was possible for me. And then I discovered that HCG offered HeART of Body—a Qigong circle.

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The HeART of Body circle is a co-creation of Catherine, Joann, Nancy, Sandra, and Maria—all students of Dr. Roger Jahnke, author of *The Healer Within* and *The Healing Promise of Qi*. Jahnke draws from multiple lineages of Qigong masters who emphasize medical Qigong and self-care. In *The Healing Promise of Qi*, he calls an increasing discernment of Qi a “resource so essential it is impossible to define or translate.” He defines Qigong as “the practice or methodology for cultivating Qi” or, simply stated, “an energy cultivation practice.”

Jahnke invites us to follow the energy essence of our life experiences and embody Qigong’s “three treasures” (earth, life, and sky/cosmos), “three alignments” (body, breath, and heart-mind), and “four baskets” of practice (gentle movement, breathwork, self-massage, and meditation).

The HeART of Body team includes the treasures, alignments, and baskets in every circle. They also integrate basic HCG structure, along with a special set of self-care agreements focused on self-regulation to prevent physical injury. Catherine, who was used to teaching in-person, says, “The only way we can do this online is to make sure everyone understands that this is a self-care practice and that every body is different. It’s important to listen to your own experience.”

To the original five HCG agreements, the hosts of this circle add their own self-care agreements:

- I agree to treat myself with respect and compassion.
- With the intention of curiosity, I agree to open all my senses to discern what my body and heart-mind* need in any given moment.
- I invite myself to unfold my experience slowly and pause when necessary.
- If pain is a sensation that I feel in my body and heart-mind, I will acknowledge that sensation and take care of myself.
- I have the power to heal, transform, and transcend within me.
- I invite myself into the awareness of my whole being.

*The Chinese have one symbol to describe the connection between the heart and mind. It’s seen as one system—not two separate ones.

Without underestimating the advantages of in-person lessons, I soon came to appreciate how a Zoom experience minimizes reliance on an instructor’s regard and even self-conscious comparison to others. There is something about the platform that inspires more independence, initiative, and focus on interior experience. The voice from the screen is a lifeline, but I find that I can more readily internalize the teachings.

Due to conflicts with my work schedule, I was not able to participate in the circle as often as I would have liked, but as Jahnke repeats in *The Healer Within*: even simple daily practices like ear or hand massage, a “gathering breath,” or gentle “flowing motion” can initiate a process of healing with immediate benefits that will encourage future practice. Conscious breathing, along with many flow exercises, can be done almost invisibly throughout the day; anyone can gently massage a hand or take a deep breath at any time—practices that are of great benefit in alleviating stress and heightening presence. These practices can be especially useful during the welcome phase of any healing circle. They provide an opportunity to ground, center, and balance.

For me, the great gift of Qigong is the habit it has instilled in me of listening for “the healer within” through intensifying my attunement to inner sensation. No matter my physical condition, there is always a gentle way of activating Qi and increasing my awareness of it, whether through practices related to the four baskets or simply through the daily assessment of whether a situation, a food I ingest, a book I read, or a person I meet enlivens or stops the energies. This attunement does help me manage my cancer, or at least its symptoms, and I continue to thrive. In fact, I’m tempted to claim that cancer has been a gift to me because it has motivated me to pursue the “call of Qi” and has brought me in contact with so many beautiful practitioners.

