



Restorative Resources

ACCOUNTABILITY CIRCLES GUIDEBOOK

"If initiation is about culture and the modern world desires initiation it will have to redefine itself. A new culture would have to develop where humans and their inventions are not at the center of the universe, and where God too is not at the center. What could be at the center is a hollow place, where both God and we humans could sing and weep together as a team pushing magical words into that sacred Hole. Maybe together, the diverse and combined excellence of all cultures could court the Tree of Life back out of its frightened and fugitive existence in the previous layers where it was banished into the invisible by our scared literalist minds, dogmatic religiosities, and forgetfulness."

— Martin Prechtel

"Every year I have to return home to my elders, not to visit them, but to be cleansed. After several years of doing that, I have come to understand that being in the West is like being caught in a highly radioactive environment. Without this periodic checkup, I will lose my ability to function. Speaking with people in this culture, I also have come to understand this sense of exile, and that I may be better off than they are because I still have elders that I can go to who will make me feel at home for a while as they cleanse me. Sometimes I find myself wondering, however, how long can this last."

Alienation is one of the many faces of modernity. The cure is communication and community—a new sense of togetherness. By opening to each other, we diminish the pressure of being alone and exiled."

— Malidoma Patrice Some

EVOLUTION OF THE RESTORATIVE RESOURCES ACCOUNTABILITY CIRCLES

The accountability circle was initially created and developed as a supplemental component to restorative conferencing. It arose from the observation that many youth who were referred to the Restorative Resources office from juvenile probation for restorative conferencing simply did not have the basic understanding and capacity required to engage with the restorative process appropriately. It was clear that many youth needed an extended preparatory period in order to begin accepting responsibility for their decisions and actions and be receptive to hearing from the people that were affected by those decisions and actions, both of which are necessary attitudes for a successful restorative process.

As such, the accountability circle program began as a way to meet this need by offering these youth weekly two-hour circles with other youth who had also been referred by probation as a diversion from the juvenile justice system. These youth then had a space to share their story, learn important life skills, and develop an understanding of the restorative process that they are involved in. Furthermore, the accountability circle also provided a venue for supporting the youth in completing their restorative action plan, which is developed during the restorative conference and contains action items that make amends to individuals who were harmed by the incident of wrongdoing. After this addition to the restorative process began showing great success, the accountability circles later became available to students who were facing expulsion for harmful actions taking place in their school. To this day, the accountability circle remains available to all secondary schools in Santa Rosa City Schools, as well as youth referred from juvenile probation.

More recently, the accountability circle has begun to be used in settings where restorative conferencing is either not emphasized or entirely absent. One example of this is an accountability circle that is held in the long-term unit of juvenile hall. The other is the accountability circles held at Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) community schools, Headwaters in Petaluma and Amarosa Academy in Santa Rosa. Starting in the fall of 2015, we have also begun holding weekly accountability circles on-site at certain select schools within the Santa Rosa City Schools district. These accountability circles developed from an awareness that simply providing youth with an open, yet structured space for honest dialogue that challenges previously held attitudes can provide the opportunity for untold benefits, independent from a restorative process aimed at repairing harm for a specific incident. The youth in these circles have usually been involved in a long list of harmful incidents, so rather than focusing on any particular one, the objective is to encourage honest reflection on the perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors that have brought the youth to their current circumstances, which in many cases include suspension or expulsion from their school or district and/or involvement in the juvenile justice system.

From this view, there are certain basic questions that are put to them in various ways repeatedly throughout the circle dialogue. In general they are:

- Who are you truly?
- What does your life mean to you?
- How are your attitudes and decisions supporting or detracting from your life?
- How can you learn to use your inherent power in life-affirming ways?
- How does your individual life form a part of the greater life of your community?
- What do you value about the world?

These questions summarize the overall orientation of the accountability circle process, which is meant to provide an experiential platform for youth to make deep-seated changes in their relationship to themselves and how they live, allowing them to take their rightful place as a creative participant in the life of the community. At its heart, the accountability circle is a process of initiation, where youth can gain direct insight into the power and purpose of being human, and with this insight, they can step onto the path that leads to maturity. This is the main context in which we will explore the accountability circle in this guidebook.

POWER, PURPOSE, AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BEING HUMAN

“We have received an inestimable gift. To be alive in this beautiful, self-organizing universe—to participate in the dance of life with senses to perceive it, lungs that breathe it, organs that draw nourishment from it—is a wonder beyond words. And it is, moreover, an extraordinary privilege to be accorded a human life, with this self-reflexive consciousness that brings awareness of our own actions and the ability to take choice. It lets us choose to take part in the healing of our world.”

— Joanna Macy

Human beings are gifted with tremendous capacities and creative power. However, our modern Western culture has almost no understanding of what those capacities really are or how they can be fully realized and embodied in our daily life. This, I feel, is the core of much of the conflict and injustice that we see in our global and local community at the moment. In large part, because we have no real traditions for initiation, most people do not recognize themselves for who they really are and what they can do, and neither are they fully recognized by their community. They are not introduced into the power and mystery of being human, which has always been the purpose of initiations of all kinds. As a result, many of us are like seeds that lie dormant, waiting for the right conditions to take root, sprout, and begin to grow.

With power also comes responsibility. For human beings, one of the central ways that this is demonstrated is through our power of choice. In every moment, we make choices about how to live. Though there are always a host of environmental factors that influence an individual’s choices, nothing can take away that fundamental power. If you have the power to make a choice, then you are responsible for what follows from that choice. It is from this perspective that we, as communities, seek to hold individuals accountable for their decisions and actions, especially when those actions cause harm.

Along with this, all power is connected to a purpose, and the power inherent to humanity also exists for a purpose. When this power is not recognized and embodied, then the purpose of being human remains unfulfilled, and we, as human beings, are unable to recognize and fulfill our essential responsibilities. As a global community, we are failing spectacularly in our central human responsibility, which is, essentially, to use the unique gifts that are given to each of us as fully as we can in a right relationship to our own self, our human community, and the broader Earth community. The fact that we have forgotten our own power and purpose does not absolve us from the responsibility that comes with it. It is only natural then, that this overall cultural failure to take real responsibility is reflected in the same attitude that we see in many of the youth in our communities.

This brings us back to the need for initiation. These three qualities—power, purpose, and responsibility—are all tied to initiation. It is through initiation that we connect with our own power, discover the purpose of that power, and gain the wisdom to use that power in service to the Earth community. This is the simple, inescapable responsibility of being human.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AND RESPONSIBILITY

“Many cultures have a word that represents this notion of the centrality of relationships: for the Maori, it is communicate by whakapapa; for the Navajo, hozho; for many Africans, the Bantu word ubuntu. Although the specific meanings of these words vary, they communicate a similar message: all things are connected to each other in a webs of relationships.”

— Howard Zehr

The process of assuming real responsibility as human beings seamlessly lends itself to restorative practices and the restorative circle format. Responsibility is one of the starting points of all restorative practices. One of the foundational principles of restorative practices is an awareness that everything is connected and that people’s choices in attitude, action, and speech affect other people, and our world, whether we acknowledge those effects or not. The beginning of responsibility in a restorative sense is to recognize this principle in action in one’s own life, perhaps for the first time. It means actually seeing, hearing, and understanding how one’s actions have had an impact, especially if those impacts are harmful. It also means making a commitment to offer concrete amends to those who were negatively affected and to take determined steps to prevent future incidents of harm.

The other piece to this is the way that restorative dialogue in circle naturally invites youth to begin recognizing that they have something of value to contribute to the world. This recognition of value is a source of power. When this value is authentically lived, both the individual person and the world as a whole are intrinsically enhanced. From this recognition comes a natural desire to bring that value forth, first in the protected community setting of the circle, where it can be appreciated and witnessed by the other circle participants. Later, from this gradual unfolding, youth can begin to live from a place of authenticity outside of the circle container and have the capability to assume the responsibility they have previously neglected.

ACCOUNTABILITY CIRCLE AS YOUTH INITIATION

“Every year, everybody in the village was somehow getting a rite of passage simultaneously in different groups at different levels; but every size person, man or woman, was doing it to save the Earth, not to become initiated. Initiation was necessary to keep the Earth alive, which is why traditional people kept coming back to help the ‘New Ones’ get through, because if these nestlings did not get through, the Earth would die and everybody with it.”

— Martin Prechtel

Typically, youth are chosen for the accountability circle because they are demonstrating through their harmful behavior that they have lost contact with who they really are and have forgotten their place within their community. Often, these are the “at-risk” youth who, for a variety of personal and social reasons, have developed patterns of behavior that cause considerable harm to themselves, family, school, and the wider community, even including involvement with the juvenile justice system. In response to this fundamental disconnection, the accountability circle is a space created with the intention of helping youth to reconnect to their true nature and experience what it means to belong to a community. While the experience gained in the accountability circle may be more urgently needed by certain youth, it must be said that it is certainly something that all youth can benefit from and would ideally be a standard feature of education in general.

Once we have identified which youth we will be serving, the first step of this initiation is to draw the youth out of their familiar social context, which has contributed to their forgetfulness, and to introduce them into a contained, protected space which will hold the possibility of remembrance. In a traditional initiation setting, youth would often be physically separated from the rest of the community for a certain period of time—days, weeks, months, or years—with limited or no contact with others outside of their initiation group. Although this is not entirely practical in most of our current communities, it is in this spirit that the Restorative Resources accountability circles are usually held at our office, a location separate from the youth’s school and accustomed social setting. This is also the basis of many programs that bring youth into an immediate encounter with nature and the wilderness. The experience of being in an unfamiliar physical location that has been designated for a specific purpose facilitates the intentional process of inner transition from one mode of being into another. Given that, it is still possible to hold a viable accountability circle at a more familiar site. The important thing is that the space of the accountability circle allows the youth to move into new ways of being that are free from the constrictions of their habitual behavior, and sometimes the associations youth have with a particular space can either help or hinder that process.

The circle process naturally brings out a variety of challenges that all youth must face and overcome while participating in the accountability circle. In truth, the circle dialogue mainly acts as a mirror that reflects back to the youth the many challenges that are already present in their lives and provides ongoing opportunities to actually face these challenges with careful attention and a spirit of acceptance in order to understand and process them in a supportive community setting. From this process of reflection, the youth can then start to extract the essential wisdom that life's challenges bring to all of us, and they can begin to approach their everyday life experience not as a nightmare to hide from, but a gift to be received with gratitude.

These challenges encourage the youth to look inward to recognize their core identity and be reminded of the values, skills, and qualities inherent to that core identity. In order to outwardly honor these core values, all youth are given a necklace upon entering the accountability circle. These necklaces are created from colored beads, each of which represents a specific core value or virtue. During various stages of the restorative process, each youth is given the opportunity to demonstrate a particular virtue and earn beads for their necklace. The first beads that youth earn are white, and they represent wisdom. The second beads are yellow, and they represent courage. The third beads are blue, and they represent confidence. The fourth and final beads are red, and they represent respect.

As mentioned previously, though the accountability circle is a distinct process, it can easily be integrated with the specific learning experience that a restorative conferencing process provides. If that is the case, then the final three sets of beads are earned during specific points relating to the process of restorative conferencing in response to an incident of wrongdoing. However, when restorative conferencing is not being included within the broader accountability circle initiation process, then there are other creative ways that youth can demonstrate virtues and earn their beads. The following discussion illustrates in more detail how youth earn beads in the context of an accountability circle that includes restorative conferencing, as it is practiced at the Restorative Resources office.

WISDOM

The white wisdom beads are earned during youth's first accountability circle. It is understood that all youth come to the accountability circle with a certain degree of wisdom that they have drawn from their years of life experience. One of the many objectives of the accountability circle is to identify and draw forth the wisdom that these youth already possess. At the same time, we acknowledge that every new experience is an opportunity for greater wisdom, and we set the intention to use this circle experience to learn how to be an active participant in this process of deepening wisdom, which continues throughout our life.

In order to demonstrate an awareness of their inherent wisdom, youth who have come to the circle for the first time are asked to tell the group a little bit about who they are. Some questions could include, what do you like to do with your free time? What are your talents? If

someone who knows you well were to describe you, what would that person say? If you died tomorrow, how would you want people to remember you? After all questions have been given a response, the circle keeper asks the other youth with white wisdom beads if that youth has earned his or her beads. If the circle agrees that they have been earned, then the beads are given to the youth to add to their necklace.

These questions aim to begin the process of introspection that leads to a gradual uncovering of the youth's true nature. Though some youth can engage with these questions in a meaningful way, there are many who are painfully divorced from any understanding of who they are in the most basic sense. Their perceptions are numbed, and they operate on an assembly-line mode of acquired habit, often negatively instilled through their experience in the family environment, as well as from influences from our highly destructive culture. As a result, even superficial questions about themselves pose a real challenge, and when asked, they provide minimal response or none at all. At this beginning stage, youth are given the space to test the waters of this circle community and are deliberately presented with an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance. We meet the youth wherever they are within themselves and demonstrate a commitment to remain there as long as is needed, while also offering continual opportunities for growth and expansion.

There is the question of what and who determines whether or not youth earn a set of beads when given the opportunity and progress through the initiation process? If youth's response to the questions is less than hoped for, have those youth truly demonstrated the virtue and earned their beads? There are many factors involved with this decision that require consideration. The first is an understanding that many, if not all, of the youth in an accountability circle are accustomed to failure and not measuring up to other people's expectations of them. Therefore, we do not want their circle experience to be yet another instance of proving to themselves and everyone else that they clearly do not have anything valuable to offer. By the same token, we do not want their own low opinion of themselves to limit their capacity to grow beyond their current self-image. It is clear to anyone with eyes to see that every youth has something very valuable that is utterly necessary for the health of the community. What's needed, however, is for the youth themselves to come to that same realization.

How youth can be helped to come to this realization will be discussed in more detail when we get into the role of the circle keeper. At this moment, in the context of demonstrating progress and earning beads, it is enough to say that the circle keeper plays a critical role in holding this balance between accepting youth's present capabilities while simultaneously holding the door open for youth to move into greater and greater capabilities in accordance with their true nature. From this perspective, it is often acceptable for youth to earn their beads for a given virtue even if they may not have fully demonstrated the virtue. This earning of the beads symbolically is often a necessary platform for the virtue to come alive in actuality within the youth as demonstrated by their participation in the circle. While the earning of beads is presented to the youth as a milestone that marks a moment of achievement, a closer look reveals that it is actually a gift from the circle keeper and the other youth in the circle. It can also be likened to a seed that must first be planted in the right conditions and carefully tended before it can start to grow.

Using the white wisdom beads discussed already as an example, this seed of wisdom is given to the youth upon their arrival to show that the circle, including both the circle keeper and the other youth, recognizes and validates their inherent wisdom. From this initial recognition, as a holder of white beads, the youth are then expected to participate in a manner that demonstrates their wisdom. The real drawing out of wisdom comes, not so much from the initial asking of questions, but from the resulting expectations that follow after the beads have been earned. Often youth can only demonstrate their true wisdom when that wisdom has already been recognized in a sacred space held by the community. Simply put, it is only possible to practice wisdom if one believes that it is already present and available to some degree.

COURAGE

Youth have the opportunity to earn their yellow courage beads during the circle immediately preceding their restorative conference. First, they are asked to describe how they themselves relate to the virtue of courage. If they have difficulty articulating what it means to them, others in the circle may offer their own perspectives by way of support. A perspective on courage that often gets mentioned is the ability to face one's own fear without allowing that fear to dictate one's actions. After arriving at an understanding of what courage means and how it can look in a person's life, there is a discussion about why courage is needed in order to successfully participate in a restorative conference. Again, the circle keeper elicits input from the youth in the circle concerning why they would need courage for their restorative conference. One common response is that courage is needed in order to be honest when telling a story of an incident where we caused harm to others and may feel shame about our actions. Another response is that it takes courage to have an open attitude in front of people from your community that you may not know.

At this point, the youth is asked to share the story of the incident for which they were referred to the accountability circle. This is an incident in which the youth is responsible for causing harm in their community in some way. As they tell the story, the circle keeper or other youth may ask clarifying or probing questions to get a full understanding of the situation. Also, the circle is simultaneously assessing the degree of honesty that the youth is showing in the telling of the story. If the circle feels that important details are lacking, or the youth is in any way avoiding full responsibility for their actions, then the circle as a whole is charged with the task of supporting the youth to shift to a place of greater responsibility.

Once the circle has heard the full story, the youth is asked to identify who was impacted or affected by their actions and to describe in what ways they were impacted. This question requires youth to practice their capacity for empathy and arrive at a felt sense of how they would be impacted if they were their parents, siblings, friends, teachers, or whoever else was harmed in some way by the incident. Again, the circle participants provide non-confrontational support to assure that all harms are explored to the greatest degree possible. In this way, the accountability circle seeks to assure that the youth are fully

prepared to take full responsibility at their restorative conference. They practice answering some of the same questions that they will be asked at their conference, and in this way, they can step into their conference with the courage necessary to face what they had done and to begin the process of helping to heal those who were harmed.

CONFIDENCE

At the accountability circle session immediately after their conference, youth are asked to report back on their experience of the conference as a way of earning their blue confidence beads. Often, youth will express feelings of nervousness at the beginning, not knowing what to expect from the other conference participants, such as family, people who were harmed, and community members. Many times they describe how they became increasingly more comfortable as the conference progressed, as it became clear that the others were not there to assign blame or judgment, but to seek healing for everyone present. Depending on the youth, some will have a greater memory of what was said during the conference, but they are given the opportunity to reflect on what stood out for them among all the people who shared about how that youth's actions impacted them.

Some youth may have questions about certain aspects of the conference that were not clear to them during the actual experience. For example, it is not uncommon for youth coming back from a conference to wonder why there were community volunteers present at the conference and how these people with no direct involvement with the incident could possibly be impacted by their actions. This, then, can be a topic for discussion in the accountability circle, where the group can explore how incidents of harm can broadly affect members of the community. Another common question is why they are always asked to repeat back what they heard from an impacted person during the conference. When this question comes up, the circle keeper can remind the youth that one of the primary purposes of a restorative conference is to provide healing for people who were harmed by the incident. The process of having the person responsible for the harm repeating what they heard about how they harmed others is a powerful demonstration of the wrongdoer's willingness to fully understand the human consequences of their actions. This, in turn, can be very healing for the person who was harmed, since the simple act of listening and reflecting back what was shared gives the impacted person direct evidence that the wrongdoer has taken responsibility for their actions, feels remorse about how they acted, and is less likely to repeat those actions in the future.

The final piece of the conference that we ask the youth to reflect on is how they feel about the restorative action plan that was created during the final stage of the conference, the piece where the circle collaboratively decides what actions need to be taken to make amends to the people harmed and thus, "make things right" with the community. Many youth will say that they feel good about their plan, that the agreements make sense to them. They feel that they can accomplish them and that they feel completing the plan will truly make amends for the harm that they caused. Others may express that they do not understand

why certain actions are included on their plan, so the circle will take some time to discuss possible needs that the agreements may be intended to address. It can be helpful to remind the youth that the action items on the restorative plan come from the expressed needs of the people who were harmed by their actions. Though they may or may not fully make sense to the wrongdoer, it is not our place to judge whether or not a stated need is valid. Full responsibility means accepting the needs that have been identified and doing one's best to meet those needs.

Some youth will also say that they don't like certain agreements, but during the conference, they did not feel that they truly had the power to say "no" to the suggestion that the agreement(s) be included on the restorative action plan. Depending on the circumstances, such as the nature of the agreement, the wrongdoer's reason for being resistant, the actual capabilities of the wrongdoer, the need that the agreement aims to meet, and other factors, there can be different responses to this situation. If the agreement(s) in question is important for meeting a central need of an impacted person, and the wrongdoer is capable of fulfilling the agreement, then the circle will reflect this assessment back to the wrongdoer and remind him of the importance of making these amends in order to complete the restorative process and repair the relationships that were damaged. At other times, however, it could be that the agreement really is not feasible or that the need that the agreement is intended to meet could be met in a different form more suited to the wrongdoer. In this case, the circle keeper could explore ways to amend the restorative plan to more fully suit the needs of everyone involved. Often this involves discussion with others who were present at the circle or even a reconvening of the conference participants.

This reflective discussion on the youth's experience at the restorative conference is connected to the virtue of confidence in two important ways. In the first respect, the circle validates that the youth has faced a difficult challenge and come through that challenge successfully. This ability to engage with something difficult is the basis for a youth's confidence, or trust in their abilities as a human being to weather life's challenges. Furthermore, the youth will need to draw on this earned experience of confidence in order to successfully complete the actions that comprise their restorative plan and repair the relationships that their actions had damaged. The process of completing this plan reinforces their experience of feeling equipped to follow through with whatever comes their way, even when the situation is difficult. Both of these points are explicitly acknowledged during the circle's reflection on the youth's restorative conference.

RESPECT

The final set of beads that youth earn in their accountability circle process is the red respect beads. These beads are earned once youth have completed their restorative action plan, the set of agreements made during their restorative conference in which all participants collaboratively decide on steps that the youth can take to make amends for people who were harmed by their actions. Once these amends have been made and the circle keeper

has verified that the plan is complete, then the youth is no longer required to attend the accountability circle, and their restorative process is deemed to be complete.

At the youth's final accountability circle, they are asked to reflect on their full experience of the restorative process, beginning with the incident that brought them to the accountability circle and up to the present moment. This includes any initial doubts or resistance that they might have had coming into the accountability circle, thoughts and feelings about their experiences in the accountability circle, what the restorative conference was like for them, and how it felt to finish the restorative plan. Another important question that the circle keeper usually asks the youth in their final accountability circle is what is the most important thing you will take away from your experience in the accountability circle? There are many kinds of responses to this question that youth have voiced. Many talk about learning to think about others before making decisions that may cause harm. Others mention feeling more connected to something bigger than their individual self. Some simply feel relieved that they have managed to come through a difficult situation in their life.

At this point, there is also discussion about why respect is the virtue that is connected with the completion of the restorative process. This, in turn, involves a discussion of what respect means and what it looks like, which is a discussion that comes up frequently at many different times in the accountability circle. Again, there are many reasons, and the reasons will change depending on who you ask. But one important aspect of the earning of beads representing respect at youth's final accountability circle is about recognition of value. Through the earning of these beads, youth are given a tangible testament that they have completed a difficult process that makes their value as a human being visible to the community and calls attention to the respect due to them. By the same token, having been given this sign of respect, they are charged with doing the same for others, being open to seeing the value in others and relating to them with due respect. As with the other beads and virtues, the respect beads are not only a milestone which they have successfully passed but also a seed for a new beginning in how youth choose to live in their world.

Once the red respect beads are added to the youth's necklace, then the necklace is complete. However, the youth do not yet get to keep their completed necklace. Rather, the circle keeper continues to hold the necklace for them until the accountability circle graduation ceremony, where they will receive their completed necklace in view of the community gathered there.

GRADUATION AND REINTEGRATION

Restorative Resources holds quarterly graduation ceremonies for all youth who have completed their accountability circle process in a given quarter. This ceremony marks the reintegration of the youth back into the community after their initiatory experience of taking responsibility, understanding their connection to others, and making amends for harmful actions. Having undergone a period of inner reflection, challenging conversation, re-evaluation of attitudes, and commitment to healing actions, this is the time for the

wider community to recognize the youth's efforts and success in this important process. The ceremony is a public event, open to all who wish to attend, and includes families of the youth, staff and community volunteers from Restorative Resources, teachers, school administration, and other community leaders.

The ceremony begins with a welcome from the accountability circle keeper, who introduces one or more speakers, both adult and youth. After the speakers have finished, there is a short video that includes interviews of various youth who have been part of the accountability circle, where they answer questions about their experience in the accountability circle. After the video, the youth are called up one at a time to receive a certificate of completion and their complete necklace, with all the beads they earned during the process. Each youth also signs A Noble Pledge, which serves as a promise to themselves and to the community to make their experience in the accountability circle an active part of their everyday life from that day onward. The pledge reads as follows:

As the graduating group of (date), we pledge to:

- Always remember that I have the power to affect people around me as a result of my decisions.
- Conduct myself with the awareness of how I contribute to my community.
- Commit to take responsibility when I make mistakes and to repair the harm that impacted others.
- Continue to work on the goals I have set for myself and set new goals when I need them.
- Always remember that I am the writer of my own story.

When every youth has received a certificate, their necklace, and signed the pledge, they all walk as a group from the front of the room into the crowd of witnesses under an arch of raised arms as a gesture of welcome back into the community with a renewed sense of connection. The ceremony concludes with time for everyone to mingle and share snacks and drinks. This ceremony marks the official completion of a youth's accountability circle initiation.

THE PRINCIPLES OF CIRCLE

“Four elders posted themselves around us in four different corners—the four directions—facing each other. The fifth elder, the one responsible for the initial experience, still stood in the middle of the circle next to the fireplace. Walking slowly around the circle, he spoke incessantly and breathlessly, as if he were in a hurry to get a job done. Somehow what he said did not sound strange to me or—I found out later—to anyone. It was as if he were putting into words something we all knew, something we had never questioned and could never verbalize.

What he said was this: The place where he was standing was the center. Each one of us possessed a center that he had grown away from after birth. To be born was to lose contact with our center, and to grow from childhood to adulthood was to walk away from it.

‘The center is both within and without. It is everywhere. But we must realize it exists, find it, and be with it, for without the center we cannot tell who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.’

He explained that the purpose of [initiation] was to find our center.

‘...No one’s center is like someone else’s. Find your own center, not the center of your neighbor; not the center of your father or mother or family or ancestor but that center which is yours and yours alone...’

He said that each one of us is a circle like the circle we had formed around the fire. We are both the circle and its center. Without a circle there is no center and vice versa.”

— Malidoma Patrice Some

Aside from the physical location of the accountability circle, the circle space itself is a specific form of sacred space, with particular features that are intentionally applied. By sacred space, I mean a protected space that allows for the deepest truth of a human being to come forth and be present. The circle space, including the specific principles and process of restorative practices, is a natural setting for youth initiation. In the broadest sense, the restorative principles provide a fundamental orientation for placing human existence in relation to the greater existence of the Earth itself and all its inhabitants. The starting point of all restorative practices is the awareness that each individual life is part of the Earth’s life, which inherently links to every other individual life that exists. From this first overarching principle, there are many other principles that naturally follow, and these principles overlap and reinforce each other. Restorative practitioners identify and describe these principles differently, but some of the key principles that guide our work are listed and described here¹:

¹ The principles listed are adapted from *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community*, by Carolyn Boyes-Watson & Kay Pranis, p. 10-16.

A community is a living system of meaningful relationships.

“We do know that in healthy human systems people support one another with information and nurture one another with trust. Our wonderful abilities to self-organize are encouraged by openness. With access to our system we, like all life, can anticipate what is required of us, connect with those we need, and respond intelligently.”

— Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers

It is not uncommon for people to intellectually accept that we are all connected. But in order for this truth to really come alive, it must be reflected in people’s actual interactions with each other. In a community, these connections are part of our direct experience. We see it and feel it, inwardly and outwardly. The restorative circle is a format in which this can take place on a small scale.

When people meet in a community that reflects circle principles, it is explicitly expressed that, when encountering others, we encounter an extension of ourselves. There is a clear priority toward demonstrating care. For individuals, this brings a sense of comfort and belonging. There is no danger of being superficially judged, so we are able to relax and fully engage with whatever circumstance we find ourselves in. Furthermore, each individual acknowledges the essential unity of the community and behaves with respect and responsibility.

At a collective level, this orientation toward interconnection allows people to communicate regularly and openly, and information can easily flow throughout the community. As a result, people are equipped to respond quickly and organically to a variety of ongoing changes that form part of all community life. Organizing of groups and systems can occur spontaneously and without the need of rigid hierarchical structures. There is also a pervasive feeling of trust that all individuals will act in the interest of the overall well-being of the community.

An individual’s true nature is inherently valuable.

“A living being belongs to the whole universe, is a member or limb of the universe; existence is unthinkable apart from the universe. And so it is with [humanity’s] life and being.”

— Rudolf Steiner

By virtue of sincere participation, the value of each individual’s true nature is explicitly acknowledged and supported. Restorative principles hold that the true nature that is the essence of each person carries the meaning of a person’s life and the power to live that meaning in relation to the community. In our modern community, more often than not, an individual does not experience this aspect of themselves, and it often is not reflected in the individual’s behavior. Furthermore, this true nature is frequently unacknowledged by the individual’s family or community. It lies covered up and ignored within that individual.

Restorative practices aims to create a space that reveals this true nature in a manner that the individual can recognize. From this recognition, the individual can access the power and meaning of who they really are and begin to express that meaning through their behavior. This new behavior, in turn, allows the community to recognize what always was present but not overtly visible before. This, then, becomes the basis for that individual's relationship to the community.

Community requires that individuals be free to live according to their true nature.

“Peacemaking Circles use structure to create possibilities for freedom: freedom to speak our truth, freedom to drop masks and protections, freedom to be present as a whole human being, freedom to reveal our deepest longings, freedom to acknowledge mistakes and fears, freedom to act in accord with our core values.”

— Kay Pranis

This principle involves the issue of individual freedom in relation to community. The unfolding of an individual's true nature does not happen through imposition. It must be invited. People are allowed to refuse, yet they should continue to be invited while also being held accountable for the effects of their refusal. This goes with the understanding that one's true nature is enhanced in relation to community, as the community is enhanced by individuals living according to their true nature. By contrast, the use of punishment and consequences is based on the view that people are naturally concerned only with themselves and, therefore, society must have systems of control that impose a regard for others on people who otherwise would not care.

From a restorative perspective, because of people's inherent, fundamental connection to others, we all naturally want to have open, trusting relationships with our community, unless our life experience has taught us that it's not safe to care about others because they will betray our trust or that they are not interested in meeting our needs. A restorative circle offers a space that is free from imposition, persuasion, coercion, and all other patterns of control. Rather, the circle space offers continuous reflection of the ways an individual's behavior affects the other circle participants, both beneficial impacts and harmful ones. This reflection serves as an ever-present mirror in which individuals can measure the degree to which their behavior is in accordance with their true nature. Over time, this reflection process in circle facilitates individuals' choosing of their own accord to adapt their behavior to be more in harmony with the circle. It is through this encounter that one accepts and internalizes the invitation to live in awareness of community.

Everything we need is already present.

“The resources we need are present within the web of life that interconnects us.

This is the nature of synergy, the first property of living systems. As parts self-organize into a larger whole, capacities emerge that could never have been predicted and that the individual parts did not possess. The weaving of new connections brings new responses and new possibilities into play. In the process, we can feel sustained—and are sustained—by currents of power arising from our solidarity.”

— Joanna Macy and Molly Brown

In every individual person and every community, there is untapped potential that, when brought forth, can meaningfully respond to any situation in a community. This perspective directs a community to shift away from a focus on scarcity and lack, which entails looking outward for additional resources or advice from experts to help meet community needs. Instead, there is a feeling of abundance in which the community knows that they are equipped to effectively respond to all situations, if only they are open to the full range of resources at hand and are committed to any depth of change that a situation may require of them. Rather than asking, what do we need but do not have here? A community asks, how do we need to come together in order to activate knowledge, resources, and abilities that we have not yet recognized?

The restorative circle is designed to provide a contained space where participants can safely explore and reveal the full depth of their capacity for being and discover knowledge, power, and creativity that had not emerged before. This is part of the transformational magic that characterizes a sacred space. By coming together as a community for the sake of the community, doors are opened that otherwise would remain closed, and the community can gain access to whatever is truly needed for its welfare.

Community engages and supports all levels of being.

“Sacred is nothing special. It’s just life, revealing its true nature. Life’s true nature is wholeness, Indra’s net embracing every living thing, able to contain all unique expressions. In a sacred moment, I experience that wholeness. I know I belong here. I don’t think about it, I simply feel it. Without any work on my part, my heart opens and my sense of ‘me’ expands. I’m no longer locked inside a small self. I don’t feel alone or isolated. I feel here. I feel welcomed.”

— Margaret J. Wheatley

All people have a need to live and relate to others from an experience of wholeness. It is not enough to feel that some parts of us are accepted but others must be hidden. If we feel that our full depth of character does not have a place in our community, then we cannot express

our unique truth and make a creative contribution to the community. This is particularly true in our Western culture that idealizes the physical and mental abilities of people while systematically denying the emotional, symbolic, and spiritual dimension of what it means to be human.

By contrast, the dynamics of a restorative circle not only allow, but demand full participation of its participants at all levels, with nothing held back. While it accepts the many shortcomings that all people carry, the circle also welcomes all the unrecognized potentials that have not found a place in other family or community settings because they do not factor into our cultural value structure. Again, within the specific context of Western culture, it is contact with our symbolic and spiritual capacity that is so grossly neglected and, therefore, so desperately needed for our personal and community wellbeing to be restored.

All restorative circles, to a greater or lesser degree, implicitly or explicitly, incorporate symbolic and spiritual elements into creating the circle space and engaging with the participants who hold that space. This deeper dimension of restorative practices is particularly emphasized in the accountability circle, with its focus on initiatory experience and activating latent potential in its youth participants. Any transformative process is necessarily grounded in the symbolic and spiritual power that lies at the core of all human experience, and the accountability circle is a space where this core can be accessed and integrated into the youth's life and relationships.

We need practices to fully embody our true nature in relation to the community.

“In daily terms, the work of listening is to be constantly worn free of our preconceptions and preferences so that nothing stands in the way of our direct experience of life.”

— Mark Nepo

In the current state of our communities, it is not easy to live in alignment with our true nature. Our culture as a whole, and the many institutions that derive from it and that we operate in, do not support a full engagement with core human values such as connection, trust, openness, respect, love, authenticity, etc. Even our family interactions offer no guarantee that we will have an opportunity to experience these most basic aspects of our true humanity. For many people, it is even quite the opposite.

As a result, it can by no means be assumed that youth will naturally grow up fully embodying their true nature and living a life in harmony with their deepest purpose. For many people (youth or adults) there is not even an awareness that the life they are currently living likely bears no resemblance to their actual potential as a human being. The need, therefore, is to find ways, both individually and as a community, to remind ourselves of what our lives are really about.

Restorative circles are a simple, yet powerful process that invites communities to come together openly and authentically for the sake of renewing their essential unity. As a community, we need dedicated times for coming together to reflect on our experience and to offer meaningful support around life's most important issues. We need a space where we can collectively explore the central questions that guide our lives (What does it mean to be a human being? What do I really value about the world? What are my needs?) And we also need regular opportunities to voice the fundamental human values that connect us, and through those values, to reaffirm with each other how we prefer to live together.

The accountability circle is a protected space where youth can begin to practice living authentically in community in a manner that is not possible in many other community settings. By design, the accountability circle is a small-scale restorative community in which the principles of circle can be tangibly experienced through intentional language, dialogue practices, and many other levels of interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, the youth can feel confident that they will not be judged by their past harmful behavior, will be supported by other youth facing similar challenges, and as a result, can take risks in exploring new ways of relating to themselves and others, which can open up new possibilities for positive change in their life. Finally, during their time in the accountability circle, the youth learn that the journey of being human is itself a matter of practice, and that there will always be new situations that challenge them to more fully embrace the totality of what they have to offer.

CREATING AND TENDING THE CIRCLE SPACE

“Each Circle is different, and no one can predict what will happen in any given gathering. On one hand, Circles have no fixed formula. On the other hand, definite factors—inner and outer, unseen and seen—help to create their unique dynamics. The more a group comes to know and use Circles, the less obvious some of these factors become. They get woven into a community’s way of being together, until they seem almost invisible—just second nature.”

—Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, & Mark Wedge

There are many specific elements of a restorative circle that provide a contained structure that creates the conditions for reflection, introspection, and meaningful engagement with others in a community setting. This interplay of inward exploration and outer expression is critical for genuine initiation. Five of the central circle elements that form the circle structure are as follows:

- Sitting in circle
- The talking piece
- The centerpiece
- Circle values
- Circle guidelines and agreements

SITTING IN CIRCLE

The circle is one of humanity’s most ancient symbols. It has a long-standing place in the mythology and cultural practice of human communities throughout history and around the world. For many reasons, some of which we’ll explore here, there is something undeniably powerful about a group of people whose bodies are intentionally arranged to create a circle. At Restorative Resources, when we hold trainings to introduce people to a restorative circle, we often begin by asking people which words or values come to mind for them in relation to sitting in circle. Responses always vary, but some of the most frequent ones are words such as connection, equality, openness, vulnerability, listening, awareness, trust, and many others. Even before any information is given about what will happen in a given restorative circle, the simple fact of sitting in circle immediately and mysteriously aligns people to the very values and principles mentioned already, which are the cornerstone of restorative circle dialogue.

On a very practical level, sitting in circle allows all participants to be in full view of each other without having to lean or shift body position. This makes it clear that one of the objectives of the circle is to be able to communicate openly and directly. The fact that we make a point of assuring that the circle is empty of all furniture or any objects except for the centerpiece also aims to remove barriers (physical or otherwise) that might impede a connection forming between circle participants. At the same time, this removing of accustomed barriers also provokes a feeling of vulnerability, as we invite people to trust that the circle structure will respect and protect the parts of them that are sensitive to the judgments of others. In response to this need for protection and containment, a properly formed circle also does not have any gaps or empty chairs, unless they are needed for a specific purpose. Keeping the circle unbroken is the outer representation of the intention for a restorative circle to be a space with its own internal cohesion and value system distinct from wider cultural influences that may detract from the purpose of the circle space. Of course, there are times when the features of a physical location do not allow for all of these parameters to be strictly observed, so in those cases, we maintain the recommended circle structure to the fullest extent possible.

Beyond these overt characteristics of sitting in circle, it also holds a deeper symbolic function that helps to orient participants to the particular values of restorative dialogue. As mentioned earlier, the circle itself is one of the oldest, most pervasive symbols of human experience, especially in relation to the subject of community. Traditionally, it is a symbol of wholeness and unity. When people come together in the circle format, it prompts a deep response that almost instinctively informs the attitude with which people see themselves in relation to others in the circle. More specifically, there is a subtle, yet unmistakable pull toward establishing a deeper connection with the people who sit in circle with you. For this reason, sitting in circle is the foundation of restorative practices, and great care is taken to preserve the circle format to the greatest degree possible when people come together as a community.

THE TALKING PIECE

The talking piece is a standard element of restorative circles. It is one of the elements of circle that is drawn from indigenous traditions, especially concerning community dialogue in a ritual space. When a talking piece is being used, the person who is holding the talking piece at a given moment is designated as the only one who has the right to speak, until the talking piece is passed to the next person or placed in the center of the circle. Its broader function in circle dialogue is to structure communication in a way that naturally aligns people to ways of speaking and listening that support the underlying principles of circle.

First of all, the talking piece slows down the pace of dialogue. Too often, when we communicate with each other, especially concerning important or sensitive issues, the speed with which people feel the need to respond to what another person is saying does not give adequate space for a truly reflective response. When people respond in an immediate

and reactive way, they are much more likely to speak from their surface emotions, rather than making contact with the full depth of their feelings. Moreover, their actual words and tone are also less likely to be articulated in a productive way, with due attention to the impact their words might have on others. By contrast, the pace of passing a talking piece from person to person allows people to take their time to look inward, feel within themselves what feels right to say in that moment, and to choose their words thoughtfully, and in a manner that represents their truth and meaningfully contributes to the wider purpose of the circle.

Along these same lines, the talking piece ensures that all voices have an equal opportunity to be fully heard. With the frenetic pace of our habitual conversation practices, it usually happens that some people will tend to dominate the discussion, while others will quietly recede into the background and perhaps never have a chance to speak. In many cases, there is no identifiable pause between the start of one person speaking and the response from the next person speaking, resulting in an unbroken chain of constant speech from the beginning of a meeting until the end. In the worst case (though still commonly observable), people are not even allowed to finish speaking before being interrupted by another person. The assumption here is that unless you forcefully assert your voice into a conversation, there is no guarantee that anyone will ask for your perspective. Therefore, in order to be heard, it is your responsibility to wedge yourself into the conversation in some manner (assuming you care to say anything anyway), even if it means stepping on what someone else is trying to express.

When the talking piece is in use, however, each participant in the circle is guaranteed a period of time to speak and be heard by the circle without feeling concerned about being interrupted. There are some parameters regarding how long one is allowed to speak at a time and the manner in which one is expected to speak, and we will identify these parameters in more detail when we describe the circle guidelines. Nonetheless, participants are given considerable freedom to fully articulate their perspective on a given topic in whatever manner accords with their own experience, without comment or criticism from the other circle participants. As a result, there is a definite equalizing effect in which the circle dialogue arrives at a more complete inclusion of all the varying perspectives that are present within a group of people. The individuals who may, in other discussions, be tempted to withdraw their participation, either because of insufficient space or because they are unsure how to participate, are instead prompted to be fully engaged in the circle dialogue and make a vital contribution that would otherwise be lacking.

The other side of this, of course, is that the talking piece also gives circle participants permission to listen with their full attention. With the slower pace and the assurance that their turn to speak will come, the circle participants can relax and allow themselves to be focused and present with the person who is speaking. There isn't the need, as with other conversation settings, to be thinking and rehearsing what you want to say while someone else is speaking.

There are times when a more lively discussion pace and allowance for questions, comments, and responses are appropriate for a specific purpose. At these times, the circle keeper

explicitly announces to the circle that the discussion will proceed without the talking piece and places the talking piece at the center of the circle. The circle keeper also explains that, if at any time participants feel that they are not being heard, anyone may retrieve the talking piece from the center and gain the exclusive right to speak. If a participant does so, once they have finished speaking, they will either place the talking piece back in the center of the circle, and the discussion will continue without it, or else the circle keeper may decide that the talking piece should remain in use in order to protect the circle integrity. Any time the talking piece is not in use, it must still be understood that there should still be only one person talking at a time, while everyone else listens silently. It is the circle's responsibility to be attentive and try to intuitively sense whether or not a participant has finished speaking before taking their turn to speak.

THE CENTERPIECE

The centerpiece is simply one or more objects placed at the center of the circle. Often the objects are placed directly on the floor or the ground, but some practitioners prefer to place the objects on a special cloth or fabric. The objects themselves can be anything, and there are no strict guidelines around how many or what kind should be included, provided they do not obstruct the circle participants' view of each other. Centerpieces can be elaborate or very simple, depending on the setting, the preferences of the circle participants, and the purpose of the circle.

There are many reasons why a restorative circle includes a centerpiece. For one thing, a centerpiece lends a sense of beauty and aesthetic appeal to the circle space. This is meant to make the circle feel welcoming and to convey the message that a restorative circle is a gathering characterized by care and attention. The centerpiece also provides a focal point for circle participants as they share in the circle. Especially when the purpose of the circle is to explore a difficult issue and participants may be nervous when speaking, the centerpiece serves as a safe space to focus one's attention when it is difficult to maintain eye contact with others.

If a group of people intends to meet regularly in a restorative circle, during the first circle, the circle keeper often invites everyone to contribute one or more objects that have special meaning to them to help form the centerpiece in subsequent circles. In this case, time is set aside during the circle dialogue to allow everyone to share what they brought and why it is important to them before placing the object in the center of the circle. This process symbolically demonstrates that each circle participant is personally invested in engaging with the circle process in a meaningful way. Furthermore, placing each person's objects of special importance together as a unified centerpiece also instills a sense of shared purpose and shared responsibility, that the individuals who make up the circle are working together toward a common goal, with a commitment to protect the integrity of the circle space and accomplish the purpose for which the circle is convened.

Finally, a centerpiece visually signals to circle participants that the circle is a sacred space, formed for a sacred purpose. Because a centerpiece is formed from objects that have symbolic value and/or have a story behind them, it helps people to access that deeper part of themselves where stories and myths are alive, and where the true transformative potential of a human being is found. This is a different sort of community engagement than what is expected in other social settings, so the centerpiece assists in orienting people to the specific expectations of a sacred space.

CIRCLE VALUES

When people come together in circle, especially if it is the first time, it is helpful to invite circle participants to name the core values that they feel are most important to them. This is part of the process of moving more deeply into who we are as human beings and uncovering the essential qualities that guide our basic relationship to life and to each other. By naming these values in circle, people can observe which values are shared with others and which are unique to particular individuals. This process highlights the dual movement of connecting with others through shared values and experience while also discovering our unique characteristics that distinguish us from others and define our specific gifts that can be offered in service to the community. In this way, we not only arrive at an experience of belonging to something greater than our individual self, but we also find how our natural talents can be embodied in a manner that enhances the life of others and fulfills a community need.

Often, as a circle identifies its core values, these values are recorded and preserved so that the circle can return to these values regularly and be reminded of those qualities that help us to live from our true self and interact with each other from a place of authenticity. Once established, the list of values is usually read again as part of the formal opening of subsequent restorative circles, along with the naming of circle guidelines and agreements, discussed below. In the accountability circle, a great deal of time is devoted to exploring the circle's values and practicing how those values can become increasingly evident in our outward behavior. This is explored in greater detail later (see Accountability Circle Dialogue Topics).

CIRCLE GUIDELINES AND AGREEMENTS

Circle guidelines and agreements are a set of shared commitments that help to define the expectations for participation in a restorative circle. Though a circle keeper may initially propose a set of guidelines for the circle to follow, nothing is established without explicit consent from all circle participants. This is in contrast to rules, which may be imposed by an authority figure, with or without the consent of those affected by the rules.

Circle guidelines are distinguished from circle agreements in that they are always proposed by the circle keeper at the beginning of a restorative circle. The guidelines articulate the very core of restorative practices and have been found to be consistently helpful in maintaining the circle space in keeping with restorative principles. Even if a group has been meeting in circle for some time and the guidelines are well-known to all circle participants, still the circle keeper will name the guidelines while opening the circle, and all participants will reaffirm their commitment to practice the guidelines or else have the option to discuss, clarify, or refine the guidelines. The exact number and type of guidelines vary among restorative practitioners, though there is a fair degree of consistency, as well. Guidelines can also vary depending on who is present at the circle, how many people are present, and the overall purpose of meeting in circle. The following four guidelines are the ones that are consistently applied at the Restorative Resources Accountability Circle:

- 1. Respect the talking piece:** The circle acknowledges that the talking piece will regulate the circle dialogue by conferring the right to speak only on the person who is holding the talking piece, except in the case that the talking piece has been suspended for a certain period of time.
- 2. Listen from the heart:** The circle commits to listening openly, attentively, and without judgment. Participants practice letting go of anything that may get in the way of being fully present with what a person is saying. It is not necessary to agree with a person's perspective, or even to fully understand it, though people are encouraged to try to understand. What's most important, however, is to care about what a person is saying and to honor its value unconditionally.
- 3. Speak from the heart:** Everyone in the circle is given the opportunity to speak, if they choose to do so. When circle participants choose to speak, they do so from the truth and wisdom of their own experience. Rather than attempting to establish facts, voice opinions, or arrive at an objective truth, the circle space holds multiple truths and perspectives as equally valid and worthy of respect. As such, the emphasis is on telling one's story deeply and authentically, knowing that whatever one brings to the circle will be accepted.

- 4. Trust the process:** In order to experience the full depth of a restorative circle, participants are asked to trust the circle process and the structure collaboratively established by the circle. This requires one to relinquish a certain sense of control over what exactly will happen in the circle or what the outcome might be. It also means opening oneself to a degree of vulnerability in order to allow the possibility of genuine expression and connection.

Some other common guidelines that may or may not be included at the discretion of the circle keeper are as follows:

- 5. Confidentiality:** This guideline is important when the dialogue of the circle is centered on issues of conflict or harm, or else when it is likely that sensitive personal information will surface. It states simply that whatever is shared in the circle is not to be shared outside of the circle. This makes the circle a contained and protected space where participants can be forthcoming about their experience in a way that they would not be comfortable in an uncontained, unprotected space.
- 6. Trust that you will know what to say:** This is a more specific application of the trust the process guideline already mentioned. Here, people are encouraged not to rehearse what they would like to say before it is time for them to say it. Rather than occupying their attention with thoughts on what to say while others are speaking, circle participants are encouraged to be fully present with the task of listening until they receive the talking piece. Then, they are encouraged to be spontaneous and to voice whatever is present with them in that moment.
- 7. Say just enough:** When there is a large group gathered in circle, it is important for participants to be mindful of the length of time that each person is sharing, in order to give everyone an equal opportunity to share fully. Without feeling rushed, everyone commits to being concise with their sharing and, as much as possible, conscientiously distill what they want to say to its essence using well-chosen wording.
- 8. Be generous with your story:** This guideline was first proposed and adopted by a group of high school students in Santa Rosa who would meet regularly in circle. It is intended to encourage participants to move past feelings of nervousness and reservation toward others in the circle and to generously share their experiences, stories, and perspectives, knowing that a circle is more engaging and beneficial when we take the risk to be open with each other.

In contrast to the circle guidelines, circle agreements are more specific commitments established collaboratively by a given circle group that intends to meet regularly. If a group is only meeting together in circle once, then it is usually sufficient for the circle keeper to name and explain the circle guidelines, offer time to discuss or adapt the guidelines if necessary, and gain explicit commitment to practice the guidelines from all circle participants. However, in the case of the accountability circles and other ongoing circle groups, spending time discussing and naming circle agreements is a good way to further distribute responsibility for the circle space among all circle participants, instead of solely

with the circle keeper. Along the same lines, additional agreements beyond the more standard circle guidelines also allows the circle space to be more personalized and relevant to the particular needs of each unique group.

For example, if confidentiality is not named as a circle guideline, it is almost always described in some form as a circle agreement. As an agreement, there is more room for discussion around what precisely can be shared outside the circle and what cannot be shared, in accordance to the expressed needs of that particular circle. It may be that circle participants are okay with or even want to share certain parts of the circle dialogue with others who were not present at the circle. In that case, the language of the agreement may be that “Personal stories shared in the circle will not be shared outside the circle.” This allows circle participants to share about dialogue themes or their own personal experience of the circle, while still maintaining the limit of not sharing personal stories that others shared in circle. This is in contrast to the confidentiality guideline, in which circle participants are not allowed to share anything that is discussed in the circle.

Some agreements aim to further define the broader circle guidelines in order to make participation expectations more concrete and intelligible. For example, from the guideline to speak from the heart, a circle may wish to add an agreement not to put down others. Clearly, if one is truly speaking from the heart, one is implicitly not putting down others, but the agreement to avoid putting down others adds a further elaboration to what it means to speak from the heart. Similarly, an extension of the guideline to listen from the heart could be an agreement not to laugh inappropriately at what another person has shared. Agreements can also address other needs or concerns that may not be directly related to the guidelines at all, such as cell phone use, food and drinks, leaving a circle before it has ended, etc. Basically, anything that may affect people’s ability to engage meaningfully in the circle space can be addressed through the circle agreements.

However, it should be emphasized that naming circle agreements is not a one-time only process. Though the process of opening the circle space, including arriving at guidelines and agreements, is prioritized in the first circle meetings a group has, the efficacy of the circle agreements is something that can be re-visited at any time, as needed. In order to do so, when the circle is first deciding on preliminary circle agreements, the circle keeper also introduces the four meta-agreements, or agreements about agreements, to allow the agreements to be continually refined. The meta-agreements are as follows:

1. Anyone can propose an agreement at any time.
2. Anyone can propose to modify an agreement at any time.
3. If a proposed agreement is not accepted by all circle participants, it is not a circle agreement.
4. It is everyone’s responsibility to maintain the circle agreements.

Since adopting circle agreements requires consensus among the circle, it is important that the circle keeper allows plenty of time for thorough examination, clarification, and discussion of proposed agreements. If, after a proposed agreement has been fully explored, there is still one or more circle participants who do not agree, it is fine to set the proposed agreement aside for the time being and come back to it another day, if needed. The discussion around agreements is not meant to devolve into a debate regarding the relative merits of certain agreements, and there is no need for anyone to persuade others to adopt their own point of view. Rather, it is an opportunity for everyone in the circle to state their needs and to collaboratively name shared commitments that will serve to meet those needs. The circle principles of equality, respect, and empathy must be strictly observed throughout the process of arriving at consensus around circle agreements.

CIRCLE RHYTHM

Along with the elements that together create the sacred space of a restorative circle, each accountability circle session follows a particular rhythm that is both structured yet flexible. Due to the rapid pace of activity that characterizes much of our daily experience, especially for youth in a school setting, this circle rhythm aims to bring about a smooth transition into a slower, more reflective mode of interacting with others. There are distinct phases of the circle session, which always progress through the same sequence. However, the time spent at each phase, as well as what is shared at each phase, can vary greatly, depending on many different factors, which will be explored in more detail below. The phases of the accountability circle are as follows:

- Welcome, statement of purpose, and awareness moment
- Circle opening
- Remember values, guidelines, and agreements
- Check-in round
- Restorative conference and restorative action plan discussion
- Necklaces
- Main dialogue topic
- Witness round
- Circle Closing

The combination of structure and flexibility creates a container that can be trusted as a firm reference point when exploring deep and challenging issues while simultaneously being spacious enough to adapt to the particularities of the circle participants and their specific needs as they become apparent moment by moment.

WELCOME, STATEMENT OF PURPOSE, AND AWARENESS MOMENT

The accountability circle begins with a short welcome from the circle keeper to all the circle participants, and a brief statement of the purpose for the group coming together, which acts as a common intention for the group. This is immediately followed by an invitation for all participants to silently bring their full attention to the circle, letting go of any thoughts and feelings pertaining to events of the day or possibilities for the future. The awareness moment marks the beginning of the transition from the busy-ness of the mind to a more centered presence within oneself, allowing for space where a greater depth of connection is possible in the circle.

The importance of sustained attention for the quality of an accountability circle cannot be over-emphasized. Awareness and presence are the foundation of authentic circle interactions, so the awareness moment is a critical piece of setting the tone of the accountability circle. Nonetheless, a true appreciation for the value of awareness is something that is strikingly absent in our cultural atmosphere, so a practice in awareness may be distinctly uncomfortable for many youth, especially sitting in silence with a group of people. The circle keeper must be sensitive to this and find skillful ways to introduce awareness practice and establish it as a consistent aspect of the accountability circle in a manner that respects the needs of the youth. It is important to include an awareness moment as a standard feature of the accountability circle, but the length of time and format should be adapted so that it does not evoke too much resistance.

This is a delicate, but important balance to maintain. In many ways, it characterizes the nature of restorative practices as a whole. On one hand, it is exceedingly clear that our culture and our communities would benefit from intensive practice in developing our capacity for being together in silence or simply having a full awareness of our experience from moment to moment. Our lack of such a capacity is one of the root causes for much of the suffering and conflict we experience in society. As such, it is part of the work of restorative practices to push against some of the cultural inertia that does not value our basic human abilities. It is necessary to risk causing some discomfort for participants who are unaccustomed to such practice for the sake of awakening them to their natural abilities that are a precondition for full engagement in the accountability circle process.

At the same time, there is a need to respect the limitations that we all encounter as human beings. This quality of unconditional inclusion is one of the principles of restorative practices. We do not expect everyone who comes to the accountability circle to be equally prepared for what we wish to offer them. Rather, we acknowledge participants' gifts and constraints as equally valuable, while still providing the support to make positive change toward a greater expression of their core self. Given this, it is important to carefully gauge how the circle is reacting to the awareness practice and assure that youth can still feel they have a place in the accountability circle space. It is fine to ask the youth to stretch their comfort level a bit, but too much stretching and new experience only makes them feel as if the circle experience is not relevant to them.

CIRCLE OPENING

After the awareness moment, the circle opening signals the formal beginning of the accountability circle. Often this is a simple reading or poem, the lighting of a candle, or the sounding of a bell. It could also be a brief group exercise that sets the tone of connection, often in a fun and active way, and helps people to relax and begin engaging with each other in a spontaneous manner. Many circles develop one or more standard openings that they use regularly, but there is always room for variation, depending on the felt needs of the circle. If a circle is becoming overly serious, a light-hearted game may be appropriate. If participants are having difficulty speaking openly, some kind of non-verbal activity may help to develop some preliminary trust that will facilitate deeper dialogue. The circle keeper may also select a circle opening that relates to the theme of connection that day. In keeping with the principle of shared responsibility, it is always encouraged for the circle keeper to provide opportunities for the youth to develop and conduct their own circle openings, or at least to have a voice in what form of circle opening would be most suitable for everyone.

The circle opening has a number of important functions. First and foremost, the awareness moment and circle opening together explicitly state to the circle participants that the restorative circle, and its accompanying expectations, has begun. The circle space is meant to be a space of focused attention and a degree of openness and depth of engagement with others that is distinct from other social interactions. As such, it is important for the circle participants to be very clear regarding where that boundary between distinct modes of being is. For example, while it is fine for the circle to chat and informally share amongst each other as people are arriving at the circle before it has begun, the awareness moment and circle opening mark the boundary between informal social space and restorative circle space, where a different kind of interaction is invited.

Secondly, the circle opening, along with the awareness moment already mentioned, is also meant to actually facilitate the transition into the particular circle space. For some, the awareness moment alone constitutes a sufficient circle opening in this respect, as it helps to reset people's internal activity and begin to align them with the deeper rhythms of circle. However, depending on the intention for the circle dialogue later, there may also be a need for something more to set the direction for the circle that day. For example, a particular reading may bring up a theme that will be explored in more depth later, but plants a seed at that initial point in order to orient people's attention toward that subject. Also, if the main discussion is likely to be difficult or heavy in some way, a light-hearted opening may be required to provide a platform of resilience before asking the circle to encounter a theme that may bring tension or even discomfort. Beyond the all-embracing value of the awareness moment, the circle opening helps to set a tangible intention for the circle that day.

REMEMBER VALUES, GUIDELINES, AND AGREEMENTS

Once the accountability circle has been formally opened, the circle is invited to remember and renew its identified values and its commitment to the guidelines and agreements that it developed in relation to those values. If the circle is meeting for the first time, this is the time when values are named and the guidelines and agreements will be proposed, discussed, and adopted. This process may take the entirety of one or more circles as a particular group is just beginning. However, as a group continues to meet regularly, it is enough simply to name the values, guidelines, and agreements that the circle has previously adopted and gain an explicit commitment to practice them through the circle dialogue. This is also a natural time for circle participants to propose new agreements, to revisit discussion around an agreement that wasn't previously adopted, or to change the language or scope of an existing agreement (though this can potentially happen at any time during the circle). If there are new members to a circle with an established framework of guidelines and agreements, it is important to allow time to fully explore the values, guidelines, and agreements and offer the new members a chance to voice their own values, ask questions about the guidelines and agreements, or to propose new agreements that will help them to engage meaningfully in the circle dialogue.

CHECK-IN ROUND

After the circle space has been created, the check-in round marks the beginning of the accountability circle dialogue. As the name suggests, a check-in round involves a passing of the talking piece around the circle to give all who are present an opportunity to briefly respond to a question or sharing prompt. If there are individuals who are unknown to each other, this round can also include sharing of names and other forms of introduction. A check-in question or prompt is intended to further acclimate the youth to being together and sharing in the circle format, while also giving a first taste at sharing one's story and listening to others' stories. As such, the youth are usually asked to reflect on what has been going on in their life recently and to give the circle some sense of what kind of experience or feelings that they are bringing with them into the circle that day.

The circle keeper can articulate this in a specific question or prompt in a number of ways, but the traditional check-in prompt of the accountability circles conducted by Restorative Resources is for everyone to share "a rose and a thorn." A rose is something positive or pleasant that happened recently or is an ongoing part of one's life. A thorn is something difficult or challenging that has happened recently or is an ongoing part of one's life. Along with the rose and thorn, each person also shares how he or she is feeling in that moment. This round of sharing builds on some of the momentum created by the awareness moment, circle opening, and affirmation of guidelines and agreements by inviting the youth further

into a more open engagement with others who are present in the circle. At the same time, the circle is still in the process of easing its way into the practice of listening and sharing without going straight to the full depth of the circle process right at the beginning.

An effective check-in question is what is known as a “low-risk” question. This means that it allows the speaker a broad range of responses that can be as personal or as deep as the speaker wishes to go. Like the rose and thorn check-in, the dialogue is still on a getting to know each other level, without necessitating anything that might be viewed as “risky” to share with a group of people. As the check-in round proceeds, the circle keeper is assessing to what degree the circle is able to go beyond this preliminary level of depth. For circles that are just beginning to meet regularly, it may take one or more entire meetings of getting acquainted and learning the circle process in order to incrementally build the level of trust that is needed for more authentic sharing.

RESTORATIVE CONFERENCES AND RESTORATIVE ACTION PLANS

If there is a restorative conferencing process being included with the accountability circle, the phase after the check-in round is devoted to discussion about upcoming restorative conferences and the progress of restorative action plans. Youth who have recently entered the accountability circle and have a restorative conference scheduled are informed of the day and time of the conference, as well as the location. For those youth who have already had a restorative conference and made agreements that are included in a restorative action plan, the circle keeper reviews these agreements, and the youth report back on their progress in fulfilling their agreements and completing their restorative plan. As needed, the circle keeper and other youth offer comments, questions, and support to those in the process of completing their plan.

NECKLACES

As described earlier, the necklaces are the symbolic representation of the youth’s movement through the accountability circle initiation process. After conferences and plans have been discussed, youth who are eligible have the opportunity to earn their next set of beads, according to their stage in the accountability circle. The nature of this discussion will vary depending on whether or not restorative conferencing is embedded in the accountability circle process.

MAIN DIALOGUE TOPIC

This phase of an accountability circle session is where the circle explores a particular discussion theme. There is an endless variety of important themes that could form the content of a circle dialogue, though there are some that naturally lend themselves to the accountability circle framework (see Accountability Circle Dialogue Topics for eleven examples). Whatever the topic, the focus is on inspiring sincere reflection, open listening, and honest sharing. This is accomplished mainly through open-ended guiding questions that lead the youth into a deep engagement with the values and perspectives that inform their worldview, shape their identity, and are reflected in their outward behavior.

At this point of the circle, the youth have settled into the circle rhythm and are ready to take an honest look at how their inner attitude has brought them to where they are in their life and how a shift in that attitude is what is needed to make positive change and enhance the quality of their life and relationships. Depending on the dynamics of the circle or the nature of the topic, the circle keeper may use the talking piece to regulate the dialogue or else invite a more fluid discussion without the talking piece. Depending on the time frame for the entire circle session and the time spent on earlier phases of the circle, this phase can last anywhere from fifteen minutes to about an hour.

WITNESS ROUND

Once the main dialogue feels complete, the circle is invited to share witness comments from their circle experience. A witness comment is anything that the youth saw or heard or felt during that day's circle, especially those things that they felt were particularly important or stood out in some way. These comments do not need to be comprehensive or especially insightful. They can be very simple observations about one or more experiences that came up during the circle.

The importance of the witness round is how it helps to develop the youth's capacity to witness their experience without interpretation or judgment. Though this may begin with their ability to witness the outer activities of the circle and report on those, the intention is for that capacity eventually to be applied to their own internal states. The first step of responding skillfully to outer challenges, strong emotions, or deeply felt experience is first to be able to witness their presence without judgment. When we judge our inner states, we are easily caught in habitual patterns that have already been set by past experience. However, with a capacity to truly witness our inner states, there is the freedom to choose our response to our moment to moment life experiences in a manner that is aligned to our true nature. In order to bring the circle into a slow, reflective pace, if the talking piece was not in use during the main dialogue, it is always used during the witness round.

CIRCLE CLOSING

The circle closing marks the completion of an accountability circle session. Like the circle opening, the circle closing is an important transition signal that releases the circle participants from the specific expectations of the circle space and allows a return to more informal social interactions.

ACCOUNTABILITY CIRCLE DIALOGUE TOPICS

There are eleven core accountability circle dialogue topics that all youth who graduate from the initiation process are exposed to at some point. The content of each of these core dialogue topics is explored in more detail as an appendix at the end of this guidebook.

1. Restorative Justice and the Restorative Circle
2. Power Through Stories
3. Respect
4. Empathy and Compassion
5. Making Things Right
6. Apologies
7. Anger
8. Violence
9. Decision-Making
10. Life Goals
11. Critical Values

ACCOUNTABILITY CIRCLE KEEPER: ROLE, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND QUALITIES

The qualities and skills of the accountability circle keeper is perhaps the most critical factor in the success of the accountability circle as a process for self-discovery, inner transformation, and initiation. While the structure of the restorative circle is a fundamental component that provides a framework for dialogue, it is the primary responsibility of the circle keeper to actively hold the space and allow it to truly come alive by guiding deep interactional processes among the circle participants. This is a highly demanding task and requires a wide range of specific capabilities in order to activate the full potential of the accountability circle.

TRANSFORMING DARKNESS WITH LOVE

“...one thing we can be perfectly sure of is that life will never serve us in our search for some lasting sense of superiority. Life is oneness. It gives, then takes; has no liking for special consideration. And with those who are most neglected, rejected, abused: there is where the greatest reality always lies hidden.”

— Peter Kingsley

The broadest responsibility of the circle keeper is to serve as a mentor to the youth participants and to model values, attitudes, and behavior that characterize a mature individual in right relationship to the community and the world. In this sense, the circle keeper is a reference point for the youth by which they can evaluate their own condition and gain a sense of the positive qualities they already possess, as well as the personal challenges that require attention and effort to make positive change. This process is two-fold. On one hand, many of the youth who come to an accountability circle are not aware of any positive qualities that they embody. In this case, it is the circle keeper’s responsibility to recognize these qualities and explicitly name them and honor them, thereby bringing them to the youth’s attention and encouraging the youth to re-evaluate the image they have of themselves. At the same time, the circle keeper acknowledges and accepts the shortcomings of the youth without minimizing the harmful effects that these shortcomings may have on the youth themselves and on others, but also not allowing these shortcomings to disproportionately define the youth.

In this way, the circle keeper is demonstrating the power and practice of unconditional love. It is the transformative power of unconditional love that allows us as individuals to confront and transform our own darkness, and then, as a circle keeper, to reflect love’s power through our presence and interactions with youth (and others) in the accountability circle. It is through the eye of the heart that a circle keeper sees through the harmful attitude and behavior of youth to the hidden value within, and it is by using the youth’s inherent value as the starting point and underlying platform for their relationship in circle that the circle keeper brings forth the inner potential that the youth need in order to overcome and transform their harmful qualities.

One of the most direct ways that skilled circle keepers do this is through demonstrating a willingness to explore their own darkness and vulnerability openly in circle. Circle keepers must be unflinchingly honest and transparent about mistakes that they have made during the course of their lives, the harms that they have caused to others, the negative characteristics, such as anger, jealousy, resentment, etc. that they still see in themselves, and the personal challenges they face as adults still learning what it means to be human. Only by freely accepting the darkness in themselves and frequently including it as a part of circle dialogue can a circle keeper hope to connect in a meaningful way with youth who so often are faced with their own feelings of inadequacy, confusion, anger, sadness, helplessness and other versions of darkness. In this way, the circle keeper also shows that

we gain power in willingly showing vulnerability, as opposed to the illusion of power that is expressed through pretending to be invulnerable.

Along with this, however, a circle keeper also demonstrates through story, reflective inquiry, and open dialogue how the mistakes, faults, and harms that are part of our story do not define who we are in our fullness. Rather than viewing hardship only as something to be avoided, or, if it can't be avoided, grudgingly endured, the circle keeper presents hardship as an opportunity to embrace a difficult situation, draw on new and, perhaps, previously unrecognized inner or outer resources, and allow the difficulty to propel us into a broader, more inclusive view of ourselves. Although it doesn't make sense to seek out negative situations, when they come our way, through our own mistakes or life circumstances in general, we always have the choice to approach them from a place of power and responsibility, actively engaging the full depth of the experience, and learning something from it.

In this way, the circle keeper embodies the knowing that darkness—whether the inner darkness of our own unrecognized, neglected, or rejected qualities, or the darkness of harms we have experienced, as well as the harms we have caused—when that darkness is acknowledged and accepted with love, it has the potential to be transformed into a source of power. This is not the power of control or domination of others, but rather the power of self-mastery, the power that truly allows us to be the writer of our own story.

KEEPER OF THE FLAME

“Behind all the distraction and gadgetry and technological hyperbole, dusk is gathering in the real world. We need to find our way to the fire. We need to bring what we hold dear and sit down and stare a while into the flickering and unembellished light that holds the darkness at bay. We need to call out to each other...and have that call returned. We need to sing our coming into the circle around the flames, and to hear the chorus of welcome that gives us courage to step into the light. We need to proceed boldly, arms open with the fruits we have to share and mouths already singing the tales of our journey.”

– Christina Baldwin

The image of the “keeper of the flame” refers back to the primordial image of fire as a central symbol of humanity. Throughout human history, fire is what gives us light, keeps us warm, cooks our food, and protects us from things that may harm us. In Greek myth, the birth of our remarkable human consciousness was imaged as the fire stolen from the gods. Because of fire's high importance for humanity's well-being, there were those in a community who were tasked to always keep a fire burning as a service to the community, so that those whose own fire had gone out could go to the keeper to have theirs rekindled. It is well-known that it is much easier to rekindle a fire from another fire that is already burning than to light a fire on one's own. This is important because, especially in adverse weather conditions, the ability to rekindle one's fire could be the difference between life and death.

This image fits well with the role of the accountability circle keeper. Many of our youth find themselves in extremely adverse conditions and much in need of access to fire for their survival. What this symbolic fire actually represents will be unique to each youth. For some, the fire could be a source of light to guide them through the chaos of their outer and inner circumstances. For others, it could be a passion for life and a sense of meaning and purpose. And for still others, it can be a place to feel warm, welcome, and accepted by others as a whole human being. The possibilities are endless. In each case, however, this fire always holds those core qualities that form the essence of our human identity and are the origin of our creative power.

As such, it is one of the primary responsibilities of the accountability circle keeper to hold a space where this fire can be made accessible for the youth who come. At the most basic level, in order to hold this fire, and make it available to the youth who come to the accountability circle, the circle keeper must, of course, have learned to embody and articulate these same core qualities as an individual. It is through the circle keeper's ability to reflect this light through presence and dialogue that the youth are able to see this light for what it is and to recognize the same light within themselves. This requires a high degree of fidelity to one's own true nature, such that it is less a description of one's work, but more a foundation for one's life. A truly effective accountability circle keeper must be tending this fire at all times, not just in circle. How this fire is tended is an entirely unique process for each person, almost always requiring some form of personal practice for inner work, but this guidebook is not intended to explore that. Yet it is enough to say that an accountability circle keeper should be aware of the importance of this and take deliberate steps to ensure that they are fully prepared for this degree of service.

The other side of this process is making sure that the fire is reflected fully and faithfully. From the circle keeper, this again involves openness, vulnerability, and integrity. In addition to being open about one's own darkness and faults, the circle keeper must also be open to those qualities that are positive, yet deeply cherished and sensitive to the reactions of others. Rather than hiding behind protective layers of security, the circle keeper must demonstrate the capacity to relate to others with one's heart open and exposed, trusting in the safety of the circle, and the respect and goodwill of the circle participants (even knowing that, in some cases, this respect from circle participants may not be evident).

This courageous openness must be joined by integrity, defined as the ability to reflect one's true self in all of one's observable behaviors, even across various social contexts, in a manner harmonious to the needs of the people and the moment. From this definition, integrity could be imaged as a clean mirror that accurately reflects whatever is put in front of it, or else clear water that does not cloud the view of what lies at the bottom. In this way, the circle keeper allows the youth in the accountability circle to see deeply inside them and models a relationship to life that brings one's true gifts to the surface of one's actions. Only in this way can the symbolic fire of the accountability circle be made available.

The final piece of this role of the accountability circle keeper as a keeper of the flame is very practical. Much of what has so far been described about the accountability circle keeper is not overtly spoken about in the circle itself. It is only felt in subtle ways by the youth

participants, sometimes completely unconsciously. The task of the circle keeper, then, is to translate these subtle inner processes into a form that is relevant to the perspectives, cultures, attitudes, and experiences of the youth themselves. This is essentially an act of true creation, where an essential quality is given color and shape in order to make it available to people who may not (yet) have access to that quality in its essence. Whether through language, music, common interests, cultural heritage, gestures, jokes—whatever the medium may be—the circle keeper is constantly packaging this essential fire and giving it to the youth in a manner that is at least somewhat familiar and acceptable to them. As mentioned previously, it is fine to stretch the youth’s habitual boundaries to a certain extent, but in the end, it is the circle keeper’s responsibility to meet the youth where they are within their own story and sense of self.

In summary, the accountability circle keeper functions as a keeper of the flame through three important processes: 1.) The circle keeper has intimate contact with their own true self or symbolic fire and preserves and expresses it through their practice and overall lifestyle. 2.) The circle keeper maintains an open channel that allows their fire to be held openly in the accountability circle space. 3.) The circle keeper skillfully presents this fire in a form and manner that allows the youth to connect with it and make a relationship to it. The result of these parallel processes is the rekindling of the youth’s own essential fire, which can manifest as a renewed sense of purpose and a foundation for positive life changes.

CIRCLES WITHIN CIRCLES

“Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.”

— Black Elk, translated by John G. Neihardt

The accountability circle keeper must also hold an awareness that the circle itself is part of a global community network, an awareness which comes from the experience of the Earth as a dynamic living being. The dialogue and interaction within the practice of circles is meant to develop within the youth an intimate understanding of their personal responsibility as a part of this greater being. The world itself is a circle, and we are all part of an ongoing, interactive, multidimensional dialogue that we call life. The magic of the accountability circle lies in the way it invites youth into this richer dialogue where they have an irreplaceable role to play. When a circle keeper is offering a question for the youth to respond to, it is not for the sake of finding a correct answer or even as an effort to increase their knowledge. It is simply to reach into the heart of each youth, to bring that heart out into the daylight of the circle, and to tie that heart to the heart of the circle, which is also the heart of the world.

When we practice the guidelines of speaking from the heart and listening from the heart in circle, we are actively engaging in the creation of a global body, a living network, which functions beneath and beyond the crumbling outer structures that we see and experience in the institutions of our current society. This simple connection is what has the power to reorient youth who have lost their way amidst the chaos of our dying culture. Depending on the age and experience of a given circle, this topic may rarely, if ever, be openly discussed as an explicit dialogue topic. Nonetheless, so long as the circle keeper holds this understanding in his or her awareness, this larger dimension of the circle practice can still take place.

One level in which this dialogue can, and should, take place is in discussing issues of social justice. There can be no doubt that the inequities of race, class, gender, etc. have a deep and abiding impact on the daily experience of our youth, especially those who are exhibiting these impacts through harmful behavior. It can be all too easy for school staff and juvenile justice workers to approach youth wrongdoing from a purely interpersonal level, in which there are discrete individuals making individual choices that cause damage to interpersonal relationships. This perspective can often even show up in the practice of restorative conferencing, in which we deliberately limit the scope of our attention to a specific act of wrongdoing, the need for the wrongdoer(s) to take personal responsibility for their choices and actions that caused harms, and the actions that can be taken that will make amends to those who have been harmed and meet their needs for healing.

The accountability circle, on the other hand, takes the opposite and complementary direction and amplifies the impact of social disparity on our individual experience and behavior. We do not negate the role of individual choice and responsibility. But we do place that individual responsibility within the cultural context of a corrupt, destructive Western society that daily and systematically causes harm to its own youth. In our experience, some of the most profound healing for these youth in the accountability circles comes from the willingness of adults to tell them that they are not crazy for being angry, for not trusting adults in authority and even defying them, for looking toward drugs and violence to meet their needs. In truth, all of these attitudes are perfectly understandable if their basic human needs are not being met by the families and communities that they were born into. Things are not right with the way we humans currently choose to live with each other, and it is an absolutely crucial starting point with these youth to openly acknowledge this.

But that is just the first step. While it is important to acknowledge the impact that our culture has on our personal experience and choices, to leave it there would be to deny our power and responsibility to creatively engage with these circumstances. The negative behaviors for which youth are referred to the accountability circles are often simply unskillful, unconscious ways in which they are attempting to meet their needs in defiance of the social institutions that are mostly incapable of doing so. The task of the circle keeper, then, is one of realignment. Although we validate the underlying motives for the youth's harmful behavior, we also challenge them to reflect on the negative impacts of this behavior and to critically assess whether or not there are better, more life-affirming attitudes that will not only meet their personal needs, but will also be a creative contribution to the life of their community. Once they have come to this realization, they are then open to being shown the ways in which they can begin to do this.

This is a subtle shift that has very important implications, both for the youth and their own experience, and also from the perspective of the community. As long as these larger cultural issues remain unspoken, the youth usually have no alternative but to fight against corrupt social structures in whatever way they know how, mostly unconsciously, unskillfully, and with a high degree of collateral damage to themselves, their family, and the community as a whole. However, when we acknowledge these cultural threads in the accountability circle, reveal them for what they are, and offer an alternative vision of community life that is based on a knowing of our essential unity, we are not only in a position to help the youth to move beyond their destructive behavior (which then becomes irrelevant as a strategy for meeting their needs), we are also cultivating the youth to become agents of change, working in harmony with the greater sphere of life for the purpose of moving into a new experience of community life.

Everything changes when we begin to find our place within the Earth community as a whole. Rather than facing enemies on all sides, feeling powerless against the dominant structures of our society, we begin to feel connected and empowered in a way that was scarcely imaginable before, mysteriously supported from within and without by this greater living body that is at the core of life. Put another way, we can show youth how to set aside the fight against what is dying in favor of taking part in cultivating what is being born.

APPENDIX A: ACCOUNTABILITY CIRCLE DIALOGUE TOPICS

1. Restorative Justice and Accountability Circle Practice

Objectives:

- Explore principles and practice of restorative justice
- Discuss and name accountability circle guidelines and agreements
- Introduce Noble Pledge

This dialogue should be used any time there is a significant number of new participants in the group and can be used in conjunction with another dialogue.

I. Restorative Justice

- a. What does justice mean to you?
- b. What is restorative justice?
 - i. Why do we sit in circle?
 - ii. Why do we use a talking piece?
 - iii. Why do we need guidelines and agreements?
 1. Holding each other accountable in a restorative manner
- c. Compare and contrast criminal justice and restorative justice
 - i. What is the intention of criminal justice system versus restorative justice?
 1. Does criminal justice promote an ethic of revenge?
 2. The importance of interconnection and relationships for a healthy community
- d. Circle keeper shares a story of a punitive response to conflict or wrongdoing.

- i. What are the effects of this (punitive) response?
- ii. How would you feel if you were in that situation?
- e. Circle keeper shares a story of a time when the principles of restorative justice are put in action.
 - i. How does this compare to your experience with punishment?
 - ii. What are the effects of this (restorative) response?
 - iii. How would you like conflict to be addressed in your own home and your life?

II. Discuss and Name Circle Agreements

- a. What are rules and boundaries?
- b. Why do we have rules and boundaries?
- c. What is the difference between rules and agreements?
- d. What agreements do we need in order to feel free to engage with each other openly?
 - i. Circle keeper proposes one or more agreements to stimulate discussion
 - ii. What other agreements do you feel we need?

Circle keeper records established agreements and reminds the circle at the beginning of subsequent sessions.

III. Discuss Noble Pledge

Read out loud the different items on the pledge and discuss what each means and what it would look like in practice.

2. Power Through Stories

Objectives:

- Listen to other people's stories and appreciate their value
- Explore the value of our own story
- Remember that we are the writers of our own story

This lesson involves understanding one's own story and how it relates to the power to choose your life's course. Through the exploration of our personal story, we can find meaning in the events of our life and make decisions about how we see and act in our lives now, as well as the possibilities that can unfold for us in the future. We also begin to realize how our personal story interacts with a larger cultural story, which affects how we view ourselves in relation to others.

I. Power

- a. What does power mean to you?
 - i. Circle keeper describes his or her view of power
- b. In what areas of your life do you feel that you have power?
- c. Who has power?
- d. How do we gain power?
 - i. Power through stories
 - ii. The power to choose

II. The Story That Got You Here

- a. Everybody shares the story of the harmful decision(s) they made that resulted in them coming to the accountability circle.
- b. Circle keeper shares a story of a situation in which he or she made a decision that caused harm.

III. Who Is Writing Your Story?

- a. What do you think other people say or think about you because of the decision that you made in the story you just shared?



- b. What are other stories that they say about you and the person that you are?
- c. How do these stories that other people say affect you?
- d. Explain that this is how others write stories for us and how, if we believe them, then we may start living as if they were true.
 - i. Give an example of a time that this happened.
- e. Explain that the accountability circle is an opportunity for them to reflect on and learn from their experience, and it is up to them to write the story of what happens now.
 - i. What choices will help you to tell your story the way you want it told now?

IV. Stories of Transformation

- a. Circle keeper shares one or more stories of people who have overcome obstacles and transformed their life by becoming the writer of their own story.
- b. Possible examples:
 - i. Malcolm X
 - ii. Stan “Tookie” Williams
 - iii. Bob Marley

V. Beginning to Tell Your Story

- a. Invite youth to practice sharing their story. The following prompts can be used:
 - i. If you knew me you would know...
 - ii. Through my eyes...
 - iii. My reality is...
 - iv. People say that I am ... But...

3. RESPECT

Objectives:

- Define respect and disrespect
- Explore the relationship between respect, self-respect, and self-esteem
- Understand what can be done to practice respect

I. Define Respect:

- a. Ask group (including the circle keeper) to define respect in their own words
- b. If this is respect, then what would disrespect look like?
- c. What is the difference between fear and respect?
 - i. Offer examples of situations in which fear could appear to be respect.
 - ii. Give scenarios that illustrate the difference(s).

II. Living Respect

- a. Who do you respect? How do you show him or her respect?

Self-respect makes it possible to show respect.
- b. What does self-respect mean to you?
- c. What does self-esteem mean to you?
 - i. On a scale of 1 to 10, how high is your self-esteem
 - ii. Low self-esteem is commonly associated with poor choices, and high self-esteem produces better choices.
 - iii. Our choices determine our quality of self-respect, as well as the respect that others feel towards us.
- d. Self-esteem is based in *what you think*. Self-respect is based on *what you do*.

III. What Can Be Done to Practice Respect

- a. What advice would you give for practicing respect?
- b. Possible examples:
 - i. Be mindful of the impact of your words.
 - ii. Show that you care in the treatment of others, yourself, and all life.
 - iii. Listen to stories of others.
 - iv. Learn from your mistakes.
 - v. Take responsibility for the impact of your choices, and make things right when you cause harm.
 - vi. Acknowledge and let go of negative thoughts.

IV. Journal Entry (Optional Exercise):

Group has an option to choose between the following prompts

- a. Who is somebody you know that represents respect? How does this person affect others around him or her? What can you learn about the value of respect from this person?
- b. How do you react to someone who is disrespectful? How does the disrespect affect your relationship with this person? Describe why it is important to avoid being disrespectful.

3. Empathy and Compassion

Objectives:

- Define and understand empathy and compassion in order to strengthen sensitivity and relationship skills
- Share struggles and demonstrate empathy and compassion
- Create a greater sense of group identity

I. Define Empathy

a. In what ways have you heard the word empathy used?

- i. Empathy can be defined as the ability to identify and understand another's situation, feelings and motives. "Putting yourself in another person's shoes" or "seeing things through someone else's eyes".

II. Define Compassion

a. In what ways have you heard the word compassion used?

- i. Compassion can be defined as the feeling of having the desire to alleviate another's pain.

III. Exploring Empathy and Compassion

a. Why is it important to practice empathy and compassion?

b. When is a time that one of you have acted with empathy and compassion towards someone else?

c. When has someone else acted with empathy and compassion towards you?

d. Who do you have difficulty showing empathy and compassion towards? Why?

- i. How is forgiveness related?

e. Who does our society have difficulty showing empathy and compassion towards? Why?

IV. Exercise: STRUGGLE IN THE HAT

- a. Take a minute to think of a challenge that you are facing right now in your life. Then write it down. Fold up your paper and throw it in the hat. Then everybody will draw one of the papers from the hat. Finally everybody will read the struggle that someone wrote down. If you are experiencing something similar, share how it is playing out in your life. If you are not, then share what you think it would be like to have to deal with something like that.

4. Making Things Right

Objectives:

- Review the principles and process of restorative justice
- Understand how the impacts of poor decisions harm our relationships
- Understand how to make things right and why it is important
- Explore what may be preventing us from taking responsibility

I. Restorative Justice and Criminal Justice

a. Criminal Justice System asks:

- i. What law(s) was broken?
- ii. Who did it?
- iii. What does the person who did it deserve?

b. Restorative Justice asks :

- i. Who has been hurt or affected?
- ii. What are their needs?
- iii. Whose obligation is it to meet those needs?

c. From a restorative justice perspective, wrongdoing creates needs for the people who were affected, and it creates obligations for the offender to meet those needs.

- i. In order for a person who causes harm to make things right, they should meet the needs of the people who were impacted.

II. Web of Impacts Exercise

a. Draw three circles on the white board one label **A**, one **B**, and the other **C**.

b. Dictate the following scenario:

i. **A** is a 32 year old man who is married and has two kids. He is asleep in his house when **B** breaks in and steals their brand new TV and gets away.

*Label the relationships for **A** and draw a line connecting them to the circle for **A**.*

ii. **B** is a seventeen year old who lives with his parents and sister. He took the TV and sold it on the Internet that afternoon to **C**.

*Label the relationships for **B** and draw a line connecting them to the circle for **B**.*

iii. **C** is a seventeen year old friend of **B** who purchased the stolen TV.

*Label the relationships for **C** and draw a line connecting them to the circle for **C**.*

iv. **A** calls the police to file a report. The police were able to take some fingerprints that **B** left on the window that he used to climb into the house. They were able to match the fingerprints and went to **B**'s house, where they confronted and ultimately arrested him. The police traced the stolen T.V back to **C** and returned it to its owner.

c. First, ask the circle, "Who was impacted...?"

i. "...in **A**'s circle of relationships?"

ii. "...in **B**'s circle of relationships?"

iii. "...in **C**'s circle of relationships?"

d. Starting with **A**, ask the circle, "How were they impacted?"

List impacts next to corresponding names.

e. Repeat for **B** and **C**.

List impacts next to corresponding names.

f. Discuss ways to make things right for each person impacted by **B**'s actions.

g. End by pointing out and discussing the ripple effect.

III. Why is it IMPORTANT to make things right?

- a. Relationship Web exercise:
 - i. On a white board, draw a circle with the word you in it.
 - ii. Ask the group to list people that they are in relationship with in their lives (*parents, teachers, siblings, relatives, girlfriends, etc.*)
 - iii. Write these in circles around and connect to the you circle.
 - iv. Go to each of the circles that they came up with and ask, “Who are the people they are in relationship with?”
 - v. Write them out and connect them to their respective circle.
- b. Ask the circle: Have you ever benefitted because of “knowing someone who knows someone”?
- c. Point out that, when you hurt a relationship and do not make things right, it is possible that it will disappear (erase some of the lines that connect the you circle to others).
- d. Note that, one reason for making things right is that they improve their chances to be in relationship with people who can support them in reaching their goals.
- e. What are some other reasons for wanting to make things right?

IV. What may be holding you back from wanting to make things right?

- a. Possible answers include fear, anger, pride, etc.
- b. If it doesn't come up, circle keeper offers shame as a possible obstacle for making things right.
- c. **Shame**- *a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety*(Webster)
 - i. While it is never pleasant to feel ashamed about your own poor behavior, **shame** does have a place in life if it makes you acknowledge your wrongdoing and seek to make amends for it.

V. Journal Entry (Optional Exercise)

Who were the people impacted by the offense you committed? What do you think are some of their needs that may have been created by what happened? What do you think you could do to meet those needs?

6. Apologies and Forgiveness

Objectives:

- Explore what it means to apologize
- Understand how to make an apology authentic, when to apologize, and why apologies are important
- Explore forgiveness and why it is important

I. Restorative Justice and Apologies

- a. Part of making amends; quick overview of last lesson

Restorative justice acknowledges that accountability requires a wrongdoer to meet the needs of victims and other impacted persons, while also recognizing the wrongdoer's own needs and how those can be met in order for everyone to move forward positively.

- b. Often, an apology is one of the primary needs of the victim or impacted person.

II. Apologies

- a. How comfortable are you with making an apology?
- b. In what situations is it difficult for you to apologize?
- c. Who do you have a hard time apologizing to?
- d. When has someone given you a sincere apology? What made it feel sincere to you?
- e. When was a time when someone's apology was not sincere? How could you tell?

III. How to make an authentic apology without assigning blame or making excuses

Avoid making the following mistakes:

- a. “I’m sorry you’re offended but ...” This implies that the person you are apologizing to is simply over-reacting, and it’s his or her fault that they are offended.
- b. “I’m sorry you feel that way” This does not apologize for a mistake. Rather, this implies that there was no mistake and that the other person is wrong to feel the way they do. This shifts the responsibility from the wrongdoer toward the victim.
- d. “I’m sorry you misunderstood.” This is another way of shifting responsibility. Rather than apologize for a mistake, this implies that the conflict is due to the other person’s lack of understanding.

IV. An authentic apology has the following qualities:

- a. It is specific.
- b. It admits responsibility.
- c. It offers an explanation.
 - i. Discuss the distinction between offering an explanation as opposed to making an excuse.
- d. It meets the needs of victims.
 - i. The apology could include additional offers to make amends from the wrongdoer.

V. Forgiveness

- a. What does forgiveness mean to you?
- b. What are actions that are hard to forgive? Who are people who are hard to forgive?
 - i. Personal—People you personally have a hard time forgiving
 - ii. Social—People our society has a hard time forgiving
- c. Why is it important to forgive?
- d. Is there someone that you feel you need to forgive? Is there someone that you wish would forgive you?

VI. Apology Letter (optional activity)

When writing an apology letter address the following questions:

- a. Did you take responsibility?
- b. Did you mention the person impacted?
- c. Did you mention how they were impacted?
- e. Did you show regret for your actions or decisions?
- f. Did you avoid making excuses or shifting responsibility?

Write an apology to the person you feel was most impacted from your offense using the criteria discussed above. Then, share with the rest of the group, and the group will help give feedback about whether it meets the criteria or not.

7. ANGER

Objectives:

- Identify what makes us angry
- Understand the difference between primary and secondary emotions
- Learn how to recognize anger and be mindful of how it is used

I. What makes you angry?

- a. Why does this situation or incident trigger your anger?
- b. It's okay to be angry. What's important is what you do with it.

II. Primary vs. Secondary emotions :

- a. **Emotion iceberg** - this exercise requires drawing a picture of an iceberg on the board with the waterline dividing the iceberg 10% of the top and 90% of the bottom. Then write the word anger in the top of the iceberg that is above water. Explain that anger is like the part of the iceberg that you can see, but in reality, there is a lot more beneath the surface. As they describe what makes them angry, help them identify the emotion that they might be trying to describe, and list it on the bottom portion of the iceberg. Once there is a good amount of items listed in the bottom portion

then explain anger is secondary to one of the primary emotions that are beneath the surface.

III. Identify Anger

- a. Ask group to list how they can tell when they are angry (what are some of the signs that your body gives that demonstrates anger?)
- b. Why is it important to be aware of when you are getting angry?
- c. Anger is a natural response to certain situations. However, it can be compared to fire, which can be either creative or destructive, depending on how it is used.
 - i. Destructive expressions of anger often include various forms of violence
 - ii. What would be a creative or positive way to express anger?

8. Violence

Objectives:

- **Understanding the connection between anger and violence**
- **Sharing experiences of violence**
- **Recognizing different effects of witnessing violence**
- **Defining and exploring different types of violence**
- **Identify various roots of violence beyond anger**

I. Our Relationship to Violence

- a. What does the word violence mean to you?
- b. When was the first time you remember witnessing violence?
- c. How did you feel about what you witnessed?
- d. How do you feel now when you witness violence?

e. Identify and explore different effects of witnessing violence.

- i. Attraction
- ii. Desensitization
- iii. Fear

II. Types of Violence

a. Verbal

- i. Using words, intentionally or unintentionally, to hurt someone
- ii. Commonly used violent language and their roots
- iii. Where and how do we see this in our everyday interactions?
- iv. How do we participate in verbal violence?
- v. How can we be more mindful with our language?

b. Physical

- i. When might there be an appropriate time for physical violence?
 - 1. Self-defense?
 - 2. Revenge?
 - 3. When and where do we learn to act through physical violence?
- ii. How do we participate in physical violence?
- iii. How can we avoid participating in physical violence?

c. Sexual

- i. What are examples of sexual violence?
- ii. How do cultural stereotypes about women and men reinforce sexual
 - 1. Violence?
- iii. What role do we play in continuing these stereotypes?

d. Emotional

i. Hurting feelings

ii. What are ways that we hurt people's feelings?

iii. How might this relate to sexual violence?

1. Cheating on boyfriend/girlfriend?

2. Manipulation?

e. Economic

i. What are examples of people exploiting others for money?

1. Work environments

2. Family environments

ii. What are some reasons why people might do this? What are the roots?

f. Structural

i. What are examples of structural violence?

1. Slavery

2. Criminal justice system and prisons

3. Schools

4. Imposing ideas on others

ii. How can we respond to these forms of violence?

g. How do the different kinds of violence relate to each other?

9. DECISION-MAKING

Objectives:

- Discuss the importance of decision making
- Explore the process of making wise decisions

I. Importance of Decision Making

a. Decision time vs. Consequence : exercise

- This exercise is used to point out consequences of harmful decisions in a measurable manner.
- Ask individuals in group to tell you the amount of time it took them to make a choice that caused harm. (ex. How long did it take to make the decision to bring weed or a knife to school?) Write all the times on the board and add them all up.
- Then explain that a part of the consequence of those decisions is the fact that they have to come to Accountability Circles for 12 weeks. Then do math to figure out the amount of time they will collectively spend in the group. (12weeks x 2hrs/wk x # of members in group = total hours)
- Point out the significant difference of time and dialogue about how decisions have aftermaths and they could be positive or negative.

II. Emotional Barriers to Making Wise Decisions

- "If you are patient in a moment of anger, you will escape a hundred years of sorrow" Chinese proverb.
 - Dialogue about how, sometimes, harmful decisions can be made when we are angry or experiencing other intense emotions.
 - What are some emotions besides anger that contribute to making harmful decisions?
- Process used to make decisions
 - How do you make your decisions?
 - Who do you consider when making your decisions?
- How do you know when you've made a wise decision?

10. Life Goals

Objectives:

- Define goals
- Identifying personal goals
- Explore what is needed to reach our goals

I. Dialogue on Goals

- a. What is a goal?
- b. What are your goals?
- c. What makes these goals important to you?

II. Reaching Our Goals

- a. Who are some people you admire for what they have accomplished?
- b. How do you think they reached their goals?
- c. How does this relate to discipline?
- d. In what areas of your life do you show discipline?
- e. What have you had to sacrifice in order to stay disciplined?
- f. What are you doing that gets in the way of you reaching your goals?
- g. What are you doing that helps you to reach your goals?

11: Critical Values

Objectives:

- Understand what critical thinking is
- Explore group members' values
- Critically analyze values

I. Critical thinking

- a. What is critical thinking?
- b. What are times when you use critical thinking?
- c. Why is critical thinking important?

II. Values

- a. What are values?
- b. Where do we learn our values? How does this involve critical thinking?
- c. What are your values?
- d. How do these values affect your actions and behavior?

III. Living Our Values

- a. What might keep you from living your values?
- b. What motivates us to live our values?
- c. What action can you take now to live your values more fully?