

The Indigenous Origins of Circles and How Non-Natives Learned About Them

The Circle process that many non-Native people are using today is rooted in the tradition of talking Circles that Indigenous Peoples in North America use and have used for millennia. Different Native Peoples practice different forms of the Circle process. The form of Circles described in Living Justice Press books most closely reflects the talking Circle process practiced by the Plains Peoples of North America. In these traditions, Circles are far more than a technique; they are a way of life. Circles embody a philosophy, principles, and values that apply whether people are sitting in Circle or not.

During the 1990s, members of First Nations in Canada began teaching the Circle practice to non-Native people. They chose to do this because First Nation communities were seeking alternatives to the mass incarceration of their people, which was—and remains—another form of genocide. Returning to Native ways to resolve conflicts and harms required collaboration with non-Native people: lawyers, prosecutors, judges, as well as non-Native neighbors. In the process, non-Native people experienced the Circle process and its power to bring positive transformation for everyone involved. From these origins, the use of Circles among non-Natives has grown.

Several First Nations in particular contributed to the use of Circles among non-Natives in the U.S. and Canada. The Hollow Water First Nation on Lake Winnipeg has played a critical role in demonstrating the philosophy and power of Circles to address harms in communities. Many non-Natives learned about Circles through their work, especially by reading Rupert Ross's book, *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* (Canada; available in the U.S. from Living Justice Press).

In Yukon, Harold and Phil Gatensby, members of the Carcross-Tagish and Dahka T'lingit First Nations, and Mark Wedge, a member of the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, have also trained many non-Native people in Circles, especially professionals in criminal justice systems, juvenile justice systems, and in schools. Euro-Canadian Chief Judge Barry Stuart of the Yukon Territorial Court responded positively and became a leading advocate for using Circles among non-Natives. For example, these First Nation Circle practitioners, along with non-Native Circle trainers, trained the entire staff and many in the community of Roca, Inc., a youth center outside Boston that works with gang, street, and immigrant youth.

This cross-cultural transference that First Nations initiated was spurred by the need to find alternatives to incarceration and to reduce the disproportionate incarceration of Native people. When non-Native people, including many People of Color, experienced the power of the Circle process to address harms and conflicts, they began to use the process with other non-Native people and in other areas of life as well. The Frogtown–Summit University Circle in Saint Paul, Minnesota, for example, operated for many years to keep young African-American men, ages 18–35, out of prison and on a good path.

Using Circles in schools quickly became another major area of use. In Minnesota, Dakota-Ojibwe playwright and scholar Chuck Robertson was a strong advocate of using Circles with Native and non-Native communities, especially around schools. With his Circle associates Jamie Williams and Oscar Reed, Dr. Robertson trained and worked with hundreds of educators to bring the Circle process into school settings.

Because Circles have the capacity to bring people in conflict together in a good way, different Native communities have, at different times, sought to use the process to resolve differences and conflicts with their non-Native neighbors. The form of the process reflects the traditions of each Native People. A form of the Circle process has been used by Native Elders for several decades in Wyoming, for example, to protect the Bighorn Medicine Wheel from non-Native tourist abuse and violations.

Indigenous peoples around the world have clearly used processes similar to Circles to attend to the community's work. Circles of stones or wood can be found all over Europe. Some European circular sites date back 5,000 years or more. Though Indigenous European forms of Circles have been largely lost, many Indigenous Peoples continue to use Circle-like processes today. We are deeply indebted to those who have carried these traditions into modern times.