



Happy New Year! This circle tale comes to us from Linda G. Schoen, Assistant Executive Dean of the Office of Interdisciplinary Programs at Ohio State University.

## Circle Tale, January 2007 The Desire for the Deep Wisdom of Community

Deb Ballam, director of the Ohio State University Women's Place, and I were reminiscing about the sense of community women found on campus in the 1980s-90s, when obvious discrimination against women often led to collective action. At Ohio State University, the women's grassroots network provided a structure through which women worked for equality in the male-dominated "Ivory Tower." In the last twenty years, much has changed in the academy, but much has stayed the same. Now, however, the barriers are more subtle and do not call women as often to work together for change. Also, what has been lost is the opportunity to share stories in the process.

We missed that deep sense of wisdom, connection, and sisterhood that graced our early adulthood. We talked about a way for women to share their stories. Women's Wisdom Circles. Where wisdom comes from each woman and also from the circle.

Would others feel this disconnection? Would others come and share? Could circles be established at a large, public academic institution? The mission of the OSU Women's Place is to be a catalyst for institutional change for women. Through the Women's Place, we developed a pilot program to offer Women's Wisdom Circles. Last January, letters were sent to all female professors and senior administrative staff inviting them to participate. The circles were described as a way for women to connect with others on campus and to share their stories.

And come they did...Over 70 women responded. Eight circles of 7-9 women were established and met monthly for the rest of the academic year.

The format for the Women's Wisdom Circles came from several experiences with circles. I drew on Christina Baldwin's book, **Calling the Circle**, which forms the basis of a sacred circle that has been nurturing and blessing me for over 10 years. Also, I drew on the group spiritual direction process fostered by the Shalem Institute of Spiritual Formation. Lastly, Jean Shinoda Bolen's book, **The Millionth Circle**, was used as a resource. Circles were established as all-leader circles, although I facilitated the first two meetings to set up the communication flow and the basic ground rules. We used a weaving shuttle as a talking piece and loved the analogy of weaving our stories together to create a richer fabric.

And rich it was. I am always surprised and blessed by the intimacy that is established in circles of women. Stories of deep life sacrifices made to attain academic tenure. Stories of being isolated as women in male-dominated fields. Stories of life and transitions, of new jobs, of upcoming retirement, of aging parents, and the search for meaning. All of the richness of women's lives was shared with joy within the circles. Long drinks at the well after being parched.

Seven circles have continued to meet. The invitation to participate was expanded to include all female faculty. Five new circles have been organized. In the process of a year, 12 circles connecting over 100 women have been birthed. What a glorious gift!

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