Our Circle Tale this month is by our Island neighbor, Wendy Dion. Wendy runs The Yoga Lodge on Whidbey Island, a small retreat facility in the woods that offers education and healing through meditation, hatha yoga, and Ayurveda. To read about Wendy and subscribe to her quarterly newsletter, visit her website, www.yogalodge.com.

Circle Tale, September 2010
Circle and Yoga – Weaving Common Threads of Powerful Traditions

I was originally introduced to Circle while participating in the 2009 Cascadia Wilderness Quest. I was called to the mountain with Ann and Christina to mark my 50th birthday and to sit with questions whose answers would profoundly shape the next phase of my life. I had felt privileged to share my passion for yoga with them and was curious to learn more about their transformational work, but my original intention was to honor my need for retreat. I sensed there were common threads between the ancient traditions of Circle and yoga, although at the beginning of the journey I was on a personal/spiritual quest, not an intellectual inquiry.

I was surprised that gathering in Circle for the first time left a vivid impression very similar to my first experience of yoga. Although there were the natural insecurities of any new group, I felt safe, accepted, and respected, thrilled to have silence as an integral aspect of the process. It was as if we entered a sacred space, attuned to a common ease or flow and accessed the heart space that reveals true story. The language felt comfortable, familiar, and similar to how I might guide a yoga class, i.e. speaking to and honoring the center; listening with curiosity, compassion, withholding judgment; pausing to breathe and gather focus; attending to the well being of self and the group. The form of Circle seemed to function much like the form of asanas (hatha yoga postures), the body or Circle creating a strong embracing container for core energy to move more freely, the center (inner body) and rim (outer body) equally essential. This regular ceremony or ritual of Circle seemed to enhance our individual process just as the repetition of any sacred pattern leads us to the felt experience of more subtle realms.

Each of us would eventually leave the circle to embark on our solo journeys, equally profound and potent. The conversational process of articulating our individual stories and having our stories witnessed within Circle heightened and deepened the transformational experience. After leaving the mountain and reflecting on the quest, it occurred to me that Circle was the piece missing from the yoga workshops and retreats I had been leading. Circle could help nurture rich and heart-felt conversation and shift leadership and quality of experience to a shared responsibility.

As a result of my Wilderness Quest, I was inspired to use Circle in two yoga retreats this past summer. It offered a way of revisiting my own story and provided an opportunity for further inquiry. The groups were different, one all women seeking time to reflect in nature and interested in meditation; the other a mixed group of men and women needing respite from jobs, city pace, and family responsibilities, interested in approaching meditation and yoga as play, from a place of lightheartedness. We used the components of Circle for both groups in the following ways:

- Circle began before participants arrived. Materials about the retreat clearly offered an invitation to sit in Circle and to bring a special cushion, shawl, and an object that holds meaning. The components of Circle were discussed and distributed the first of three times we sat.

- The intention for each retreat had been outlined in its description. One retreat recognized the summer solstice and invited participants to honor the light and allow it to inspire fresh clarity and vision through yoga. The other invited participants to approach the components of yoga from a playful vantage point.
- Our welcome included lighting a candle in the center with fresh flowers, placing our meaningful objects, and chanting Om. We used talking piece and silent council.

- The check-in process was invaluable. As the host, it gave me a sense of group expectations and helped me stay attuned to each person's process. In addition to our meditation and yoga sessions, it gave the group another opportunity to be fully present and experience supportive compassionate community ("kula" in yoga). The check-in question seemed essential in creating a pathway for people to be receptive and to speak their truth candidly. It was satisfying to watch those with apprehensions during the first Circle settle into a greater sense of ease in subsequent councils.

- The role of host as guide and steward of group process was an essential component. Like teaching yoga, I could invite group members to become more sensitive to an inner guide or guru and to trust that group wisdom can and does emerge. What I realized is that this allowed my story to evolve because my energy remained fluid. I participated as a peer, seated as part of the rim yet sustained by the center.

- Circle agreements and practices aligned with and strengthened the internal qualities we cultivate (dharna) in meditation and yoga. Circle enhanced the message of yoga – the importance of each unique voice held in harmony with a common sense of wholeness. It seemed that the common threads of Circle and yoga enhanced people's ability to make dramatic shifts in a very short period of time. Several group members have since related that they are using Circle and yoga at home.

- In addition to the agreements, both groups vowed to take care of self, each other, and place. Although seva (acts of kindness offered without wanting anything in return) is part of retreat, the spoken vow appeared to open a doorway for people to offer more spontaneous and abundant gifts.

- Members of the group were invited at different times to serve as the guardian. We used tingsha bells to rest in silent council between contributions. I was repeatedly moved by how consciously each member considered this role of safeguarding the group. Just as practicing yoga reminds us of our precious intrinsic nature, this conscious decision to serve as guardian also seemed to be a reminder of each precious life around the circle honoring and being nourished by the precious pulse of center.

- Checkout and farewell included a poem and chanting Om. Just like at the end of a yoga practice, the energy felt powerfully peaceful, our bodies and the Circle embracing a greater fullness we had ignited together.

*If you have a tale to tell, contact the PeerSpirit office and we’ll help you share it.*

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