

The Wisdom of Circles: In Conversation with John Malloy by Joserra G.

As part of our Community Anchors mobious and dynamic process we have engaged in different conversations during last months! Labour of Love Values, Holding Space, Nurturing Ripples, Laddering Journeys, Engagement Spectrum... All of it and so much more!

Few weeks ago we had the joy of spiraling up together in the wisdom of circles, in an amazing conversation with our inspired elder John Malloy. This was the first time we had a guest speaker in last month's calls and it was truly delightful, deep and natural! Here you have some of the main insights and reflections from John and others. John dives into the wisdom of circles, the role of anchors and facilitators, the nature of human groups, different types of leadership... Almost everything John says gives for a ton of reflection. He is someone who says a lot even when he is silent; understanding, compassion, deep listening... we hope this transcription is able to share the gifts of what was shared, and the wisdom in between.

Anne Veh introducing John: John speaks of his role in the circles as 'My role is to tend the fire, and as long as I tend the fire, there will be circles.' He carries this great responsibility with humility and grace and without the tender of the fire, you wouldn't have community. John will not approach you, he will wait for you to approach him. And when you show up he is there for you. As Angeles Arrien, a seminal teacher in John's life would say: "If you show up, pay attention, tell the truth, and not be attached to outcome, great healing is possible". The fire John is tending is an eternal fire. We have all gathered around campfires as long as we can remember, and that's what John does so skillfully, he creates safe spaces for all of us to remember how to be human.

In John's circles, all generations are present. I was struck with the circles at Wildlife, with the youth, where there would always be an elder in the circle. So I have gotten to think that you can't have a circle without an elder or without a child. I also learned the importance of silence, and trust the great wisdom of silence. It has been a great learning for me to trust my internal voice, to know when it is appropriate to speak and when not to speak. John would meditate before every circle, and the seed question he shares in the circle always rises from within.

I also want to share one experience I had with John. This was after screening Teach Me To Be Wild with a group of young women who are in a juvenile detention facility. These girls had various traumas in their lives, and they didn't trust each other, so after the screening we formed a circle. John begun in silence, and when he asked for reflection, there was a 10 minute silence, and he just waited. It was stunning just to wait in that silence and then one young woman stood up and said: 'I feel you are going to think I am crazy, but I want you to know that I love you all.' And that was so powerful. John then asked if anyone

wanted to respond to this young woman and everyone was silent and that was again several minutes. And then John said: 'If you agree with what this woman has said, then stand up.' And everyone in the circle stood up. It was so powerful to witness that knowing, knowing what is the right action in the right moment and really trust the silence.

Thank you John, welcome.

John: Anne, I feel you know me so well, you summed it up! (smiles). For me, first thing I would like to say is that the circle is a way of life. It's not a strategy, it's not a technique. It can't be fate, it can't be imitated. You really have to bring your medicine to the circle, and each of us has a medicine for every different circle.

I look for circles everywhere in life, a blood cell, a tear drop, humans circling up when they hear a drum... Whenever I am in a circle and I see a person it reminds me to look for the full person. I want to show great respect for each person and honor each person, and the best way for me to do that is to walk around that person, sometimes literally. There are so many levels to the person that usually we don't see.

I feel proud that after 50 years I can say our circles are never incestuous, they are not mixed up. Everyone knows their place and their responsibility, everyone has a place and a responsibility, and those are ever changing. For me, an altar helps a lot when forming a circle. I often ask people to form the altar; I feel it's necessary because the altar channels and balances all the different energy in the room. The altar is a living thing and it's always changing, it might be a blanket, a candle, always changing. What I noticed over time is that people start bringing their medicine to the altar, whether it's a plant, a food, a sacred object. The altar becomes really important, it's part of the circle.

4 healing salts of a circle

I have come to realize that there are four healing salts in nearly every healing circle: Silence, Storytelling, Sound and Movement.

1. Silence: some people are terrified by silence so I introduce that and make sure everyone knows that as a leader I am responsible for you, that when you close your eyes, I will be your eyes. Once people get more used to silence usually they call for it. Sometimes kids would say: 'John, the reason the circle is not working is because we didn't sit in silence together'.

2. Storytelling: How does my story connect with your story and everyone else's story? Once we start connecting our stories we don't have vertical relationships, we have horizontal relationships. It's really important that everyone brings their story so we have a collective story. Sometimes we have created a new story with a circle where everyone adds a little, and at the end of it we have a group story and then we all end up knowing each other at a subconscious level more than at a rational level and so we can know who we are speaking to. Storytelling is very important. I am usually struck by how people overlook their stories. Yesterday I was asking kids: 'what adults believe in you and what is it they believe about you?' Very few had any adults believing in them, and if there were, it was usually a mum or an aunt. How can they know their story if no adult has sat down with them and asked them: 'could you tell me your story?' More stories go unknown and we end up having a lot of anonymous people. So storytelling is not a trick, it's not a seduction, it's a connection.

3. Movement is also a healing salt. The other day, kids didn't know how to talk to each other, although they are friends. So the way we created movement was through the breath, inviting them to touch each other's shoulder and then synchronize their breaths, so the movement was in the breath. The whole energy shifted as people touched each other and listened to their breaths; first two people connected, then four people and soon thirty of us were breathing in sync. Then the words came after that. So it doesn't have to be apparent movement, it can also be something as subtle as the breath.

4. And then there is sound, sound of the drum, sound of the bell, sound of the chant...

'Don't let your diploma be your death certificate'

I love this saying: 'Don't let your diploma be your death certificate.' Lot of people feel they need to be qualified to lead or ladder a group, to take responsibility, to organize... but I would say: instead use your imagination, everyone has imagination, we don't know how to access it sometimes, but a group leader knows how to access it. Working at Wildlife Associates, people come and connect with horses. I usually ask the kids: 'Do you think the horses care how much you know?' And usually there is a silence and then: 'No'. That's right, so what do they care about? And I say: 'They care how much you care.' As far as leading, people care of how much you care. You might be leading a group of addicts, a group of financially poor people, highly educated people... It doesn't matter; you just have to present yourself with authenticity. The idea of knowing yourself becomes so important. You cannot know yourself if you don't treasure yourself. Usually when I ask people to write down a list of things they appreciate and they don't about themselves, they would usually write more on the negative side, so you can't really put yourself in that position. If you have to lead a group, you have to value yourself. We all had moments of truth when we value ourselves, and those moments of truth when the fire goes through you, the only thing left is going to be those precious stones within yourself. That is your internal capacity. I am always polishing my internal capacity, I don't let myself sit on a shelf and gather dust, I give my capacities away.

Wisdom of Circles.

In groups I try to model that. I feel people appreciate when I am just another member of the group. Presently my sister is very sick, and now in the parent support community group, I find myself talking about my sister.

I also feel groups are best led with questions not with statements. Questions lead to a process. People are going to share what they are carrying anyways. Questions don't matter even that much, the important thing is that people express what they carry. 'We say, the opposite of depression is expression.' We are trying to uplift the group, how do you uplift the group? We give space, you don't give a bunch of rules... No matter who sits in the group, you don't lower the bar because your job is to uplift the people. And how do you do that? You believe in them. Sometimes people say, that person is not trust worthy, and I would say, everyone is trust worthy, question is: where are they trust worthy? Somebody might know of car engine, ask him or her. Everyone has something valuable. The more diverse is a group the better the soup is going to be when you stir it. A lot of people are looking for connection just with their own kind, but I feel that's a mistake. You don't have to be intimidated when someone is very loud, someone is very shy... how do you balance that? It's the group's work, not only the leader's work. Key is safety, if the loud person feels safe, he or she will become less loud over time, or the shy person will become less shy, so then you bring everyone to the center, you feel that humanity, now you have that trust, and once you have that trust miracles just happen daily. I never went in a group where I didn't see miracles. Miracle to me is when someone becomes positive

and creative, they are not negative or critical, they are filled with wonder. I basically look at groups as a wonder-full thing, a place to unleash creativity, creative fire and that deals with depression, that deals with sadness... and so I consider most groups grief groups; we've usually lost a lot, culturally, family wise... Knowing the grief process is always important. How do you balance the losses with the opportunities you have here and now?

Q: How can I be patient with myself and my weaknesses?

Language is so important. For example instead of using the word weakness, I would reframe it as vulnerability. Vulnerability is a strength not a weakness. I also ask the group for help just like another group member. 'I hit a wall, I don't know what to do... Could you help me?' I just think everyone has weaknesses, but not as a defect. It might be just that we don't have experience with that, but we have the capacity, we have everything we need to make it, we just spent our time and energy developing another part of ourselves... I believe there is a place for everyone to lead.

As a leader you have responsibility, and you have to ask yourself, what I stand for? And if you don't know what you stand for, maybe you shouldn't put yourself in that position, because it can be confusing, and you might end up misleading people instead of leading people. We have to be clear of what we stand for, and if we are, then we don't end up acting out our shadow world and we don't retreat from our responsibilities.

Q: How important are guidelines in leading groups?

One of the guidelines to me is to never use force. For example, in a circle, someone can say I pass, and that's legitimate. The way I explain it is that the person is putting a boundary for themselves, and in groups we should be teaching how to put boundaries for yourself, how to honor your timings. Or if someone has written something, they should be able to make the decision of when to share it, they should be able to make those decisions themselves, and no matter what their decision is, they should feel honored and respected.

Trishna: What is our responsibility of holding space when we ourselves are in a vulnerable or rocky place? Should we keep holding circles then?

John: For me, if I can I pass it on I do that. Two years ago physically I couldn't stand for long in a circle so I passed it to someone else, I supported them, but they took my responsibility. We are always mentoring people, so in case something happens, we can go do it. For me for example, my family is priority and now in my parents support group I passed on my responsibility so I can be with my sister. We do things freely not out of obligation, so I think you should feel free to pass on the responsibility. Sometimes you might need an explanation sometimes not. Sometimes we know the person is ready, so might not need an explanation.

Sometimes it helps us if we go through it together with the other people, even if we aren't our best, we show up. Traditional way is to show up. One of my main cultural teachers, I would ask to come over quarterly and talk to our school community and he came over and he couldn't speak because he was sick. So he just came, we put a blanket on him and we as a group spoke about what I asked him to talk about, and he just witnessed that. Sometimes, the elder cannot longer lead the same way, but he still leads by just being present. Presence is powerful.

Swara: Around me circles are not very natural. Teachers instruct and the rest listen. Circles as a way of living hasn't being very innate to our context, very natural. Is there a way you can align yourself to the nature of circles in community? And how do you anchor

them, how do you bring them alive?

John: I feel very little learning takes place in any classroom. I have been asked to go to different schools and I always see traditional classrooms. And directors and teachers ask me: 'How can we change the culture of the school? We don't have a lot of money'. And I say, simply arrange your class in a circle, it will cut down the misbehavior, people will not look into each other's backs so they won't be thinking of messing up with someone or doing it. But in most cases, teachers would refuse to teach in a circle, they want to be upfront, leading from the front, there is a lot of resistance to circle... And this is where it's really important to know how to hold your ground. There is a school nearby, and they invited me to share with the kids recently. They took me to the library, no adult is there, I don't know anyone and kids, males, 17, 18 year olds, they were sent there, and suddenly I find myself with 60 kids, and I just stay quiet. I am going to lead the group I know that, but I stay quiet until someone says: 'ey, is this another anger management class or what?' And then I say: 'I don't want to disrespect you guys today, I want you to be wild today, intuitive with me today. I brought these things with me, could you make it into an altar for me?' Then I asked them: 'tell me the story about your pain', and they start sharing about their pain... Three hours and a lot of tears later and a lot of taking care of each other, out in the patio there is a band, there is a barbecue, but there are still couple of guys to go... I say: 'looks like it's time to go.' And they say: 'It's not time to go yet, we haven't finished yet.' And those guys not only make sure there is time for the two left to share their story of pain, they also end putting up the altar ... I just held my ground and I look for their true nature, and their nature is, we want to help each other.

When you are in a context where there is diversity of agendas, which might be your case, you might have someone with a business agenda, someone might want to feel whole, someone else's agenda might be to be a dreamer, or a teacher... We have to see these different agendas and bring them up to the surface, and find what we have in common that we want to share...

I feel, in the end it comes down to who you are. If you are the light in a dark room, people are going to gather around you, if you are the drum, people are going to come to the drum. So you got to be drum, you got to be the light, you got to be the crystal bell...

Joserra: For some circles or processes they might last only few months, some people might come to few circles, and their inner journeys open up. So how do you take care of those processes which get opened? What is the balance between broadcasting and deep-casting? Sometimes we create many events, circles, so many processes are opened, but we cannot reach everywhere as anchors, so how do you balance that?

John: In the Foundry School, students would stay for nine months or one year. We weren't trying to give them their high school diploma, we were trying to get them to love learning again, and take responsibility for their life, watch their pain deeply so they could go on and use their pain as medicine and help the next person. At the end of the year, their job is to turn around and give their position to another person who is in pain and needs now their position. So many people would come to me and say, John, the part of the program I love the most is the circle, so we did two circles a day. People would say: 'You are demanding in the circles, but still, I want to come back every day, and see what's going to happen next!' They bought into the life of the circle. Your responsibility is to keep developing the life of the circle. Your circle doesn't have to last forever, it doesn't have to be a 6 month internship for example, if you allow that person to be totally who they are, they come alive in your circle because they claim who they are, they don't wear a mask anymore, they are not pleasing anyone and that's itself a beautiful thing...

Sometimes I say to teachers and parents: 'Focus more on how a child is, than what a child does.' And another one: 'You are not fixing a problem, you are growing a child.' In group I always remember that. We are not in a group to fix people, we are watching people grow. Sometimes the best way to 'fix' each other is just to sit in a circle. There is a chemistry that takes place, the problems we walked in with have dissolved, or the edge of the problem has been removed, and that just happens by sitting with each other.

More about John...

John went to work for the county probation department as a senior group counselor at the mere age of 21. It was there that he first used group therapy to help inmates make peace with their victims' families and with their own families. He also sought to guarantee prisoner rights - primarily, to safety, self-expression, physical exercise and personal relationships. Seven years later, John was asked to help start The Foundry, initially a "resting spot" school for kids who had been in jail. Usually, about 50 students, 8th - 12th grade, attend, and another 50-70 are on the waiting list. John was the heart of this school 25 years.

Early in his career at the the Foundry, John obtained a BA in sociology and psychology, and an MA and PPS credential in educational counseling, all from San Jose State University. He says his main education, however, has come from studying with noted anthropologist and shaman Angeles Arrien, from Native American Lakota teachers, from an inmate who inspired him to become vegetarian, and from the Foundry's kids and their parents. John has also gleaned much from his visits with land-based indigenous people of Africa, Mexico, South America and Russia and from his travels with holy people. "All the holy people I've traveled with say our nature is good," he says. "So if someone does the wrong thing, there is a purpose for their behavior." John currently works as an Intervention Specialist at the Santa Clara Unified School District, where he helps to change the climate of five schools working with troubled students through group work as well as the teachers and principals. He also leads/directs an Intergenerational Support Group (focusing on grief and trauma) in San Jose for the past 34 year.

And more of his amazing journey in DailyGood.