



Sage-ing® International

Wisdom and Spirit in Action

Wisdom Circles...

The Sage-ing® Journey

Ideas for Successful Circles

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2nd Edition

Sage-ing International: www.sage-ing.org

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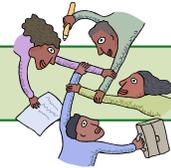
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"I was beginning to think I was invisible... until I went to a Sage-ing® program"

Rose (84 year old participant)

Why a Circle



Circle of Elders

Black Elk, Oglala Sioux Holy Man, reminds us of circle power as experienced in his culture:

“You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round...The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a (hu)man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.”

Our Wisdom Circles take place with the participants seated in a circle. Everyone is equidistant from the center, with equal visual access to everyone else. . The process respects the experience and wisdom of each member of the circle. The circle is sacred-- the whole time together allows for speaking and hearing of truth. It is a place of safety and respect.

So it is appropriate in reclaiming our elderhood that we gather in circles.

“The power of the Circle...recognition of sacred space through ritual, the creation together of relational covenants to guide how we treat each other, the use of a talking piece to give everyone voice and promote good speaking and good listening, and a circle of collective wisdom where everyone is equally responsible for the outcome.”

Tom Porter, Peace and Justice, United Methodist Church





A Wisdom Circle is...

- ❖ An opportunity to explore, share and understand what is deeply meaningful to each of us regarding the journey from aging to Sage-ing®.
- ❖ A dialogue that focuses on topics related to aging and the changing role of elders in our society.
- ❖ A safe, respectful place to engage in life review, healing, and focusing on our legacy.
- ❖ A place for learning some tools to become wise sages.

A Wisdom Circle is not...

- ❖ A therapy group.
- ❖ A religious or political group.

The purpose of this pamphlet is...

- ❖ To guide you in deciding if you want to start a Wisdom Circle.
- ❖ To provide you with basic information on how to start a Wisdom Circle and how to maintain it.



Guidelines for Wisdom Circle Participants

- ❖ Be a good listener.
- ❖ Be comfortable with silence.
- ❖ Leave the need to advise or fix others.
- ❖ Have a general sense of curiosity.
- ❖ Keep an open mind to the views of others.
- ❖ Have a good sense of humor and use it wisely.
- ❖ Appreciate the differences among people.
- ❖ Be willing to: Be vulnerable; Reflect honestly on your life experience; Share your feelings; Learn.

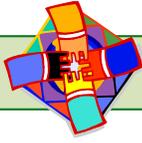


Why Have a Wisdom Circle?

To Support Each Other:

- ❖ In assuming our rightful place in our family and in society.
- ❖ In becoming appropriate role models for younger generations.
- ❖ In appreciating our elder years as an essential part of the human experience.
- ❖ In discovering the new role of elders as we live longer, healthier lives.
- ❖ In discovering mental and emotional aspects of ourselves that may have been neglected earlier in life.
- ❖ In becoming leaders with a unique vision for the world that comes with having lived a long life.
- ❖ Through discussion of topics such as self love, developing wisdom, forgiveness, facing mortality, leaving a legacy and other Sage-ing® teachings.





Fundamental Agreements

- ❖ We commit to confidentiality: What is said in the Wisdom Circle stays in the Circle. In this way everyone will feel safe and will be able to share more willingly and openly.
- ❖ When a participant is speaking, we listen with compassion and without judgment, maintaining an open mind to what is being said.
- ❖ No one is ever required to say or do anything he/she is not comfortable with.
- ❖ We speak only for ourselves; using “I” statements; We speak in a way that encourages dialogue; We strive to be brief and to the point.
- ❖ We listen with respect; We listen for understanding; We are open to be transformed.

How to Begin



- ❖ Select a convenient date, a time to begin and a time to end, and a location for the meeting. Consider parking, physical comfort, abilities of members to get in and out of the building.
- ❖ Select five to ten people to invite. Consider the “Guidelines for Wisdom Circle Participants” section above.
- ❖ In planning your initial meetings, here are some questions/suggestions you may want to consider:
 - Decide on the longevity of the group. This might be decided by the group after the third or fourth session.
 - What topic do you want to start with? (See the list of suggested topics below)
 - Do you want music? Soft music might help set the tone when participants enter the room. It also could be helpful if you start the meeting with a short personal (five minutes)

reflection time. Classical music or sounds of nature are good choices. Spring Hill Music has excellent selections.

- A focal point in the middle of the circle can give meaning to the group. This could include objects from nature, or every one could bring a small object meaningful to them to place in the center. Each person could use their object to introduce themselves.
- You might want to begin with a poem, a short meaningful story, or quiet time to reflect. See the resources below for poetry and story ideas.
- Checking in: Open the meeting with an opportunity for each person to say how they are doing, what is new in their life, etc.
- How will you end the meeting? Each person could say what the group meant to them, or what they learned. A poem or reflection time are also good ways to end.
- Should there be some time to socialize before or after the discussion?
- Will you include refreshments?
- Some Circles use a "talking stick" which is a decorated stick which is held by whoever is speaking. Only the person holding the talking stick speaks. When the speaker is done, they put down the talking stick in the middle of the circle, and whoever wants to speak next picks it up. This practice helps everyone give full attention to the speaker, and prevents "talking over" each other.

Here are some resources you will find valuable:

- ❖ The seminal book *"From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision for Growing Older"* by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ron Miller can provide an excellent book study for a Wisdom Circle. It has exercises

at the end of each Chapter which can be done in the group, or done as homework, to be discussed in the group.

Note: There is a free, downloadable PDF group leaders' guide to an 8 session book study program on "From Age-ing to Sage-ing", with handouts, at

<http://www.uua.org/documents/hoertdoerferpat/elderhoodspirituality.pdf>

This document was written by long-time Certified Sage-ing Leader Pat Hoertdoerfer for use by discussion groups in Unitarian Universalist churches. It is a valuable guide for any group wanting to study "From Age-ing to Sage-ing." As it was produced over 10 years ago, some of the specific references to sources may be outdated, but the process outlined is right on target.

- ❖ The key concepts and practices of sage-ing are presented in workbook format in "The Sage-ing Workbook" available at www.sage-ing.org.
- ❖ We also recommend that you explore the resources offered by PeerSpirit, Inc., including the infrastructure of The Circle Way's process, based on the life work of Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, which have served as a valuable source for some of our work. They have a number of terrific resources available through their website, <http://www.peerspirit.com/books-audio-gifts.html>, including:
 - Their free, downloadable "Basic Circle Guidelines" which is available in several different languages.
 - Their guidebook, "A Harvest of Years, A PeerSpirit Guide for ProActive Aging Circles," (written by their colleague Cynthia Trenshaw).
 - Christina and Anne's book: "The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair."
 - Christina's book: "Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture."
- ❖ Sage-ing® International has Certified Sage-ing Leaders, and Sage-ing Circle Facilitators who have been trained to lead Circles. You might

want to consult www.sage-ing.org to see if a trained facilitator is available in your area.

- ❖ You might want to get training in leading a Circle by participating in a Sage-ing Circle Facilitator weekend training, conducted by our partner, Memorial Brainworks:
<http://www.qualityoflife.org/memorialcms/index.cfm/brainworks/sageing/>



Sample Agenda

Call the Circle: Light a candle.

Opening: A poem, quote, or some words of wisdom about the topic.

Review the Guidelines:

Listen with respect; seek to understand, not persuade; speak from your heart with meaning using “I” messages; be brief.

Check-in: For this you may want to use a talking stick to eliminate any cross talk.

For the check-in, each participant tells briefly some news of their life. The facilitator could ask for some response to a certain point on the topic of the day.

Topic of the Day: (see Suggested Topics section for ideas, suggestions)

Facilitator presents new information, tells about a book, an article, uses quotes, poems and then poses some questions for discussion.

Discussion: Divide group into 2’s, 3’s, or 4’s and allow about 15-30 minutes for discussion.

Give 3-5 minute warning to conclude. Convene back into circle.

Share AHA’s:

This is a dialogue/discussion about the topic—new learnings, sharings with whole group from individuals or the small groups.

Check-out:

Talking stick may be used here also. Each participant may say just a sentence, or if time is short, even one word; or each participant might address the question "*What new intention do you take away from this meeting?*"

Closing the circle:

Closing thought, poem, words. Blow out candle, retrieve items from table, etc.

Suggested Topics

1. What is an elder's role in society today?
2. How do I feel about aging?
3. How do I feel about change? Do I resist it? If so, how?
4. Forgiveness: What is it and how is it done?
5. How do I prepare for my mortality?
6. What role does purpose play in my life?
7. Discuss books, movies and poetry that have influenced me.
8. What do I have to offer to my family, my community, my world?
9. What regrets do I have? What do I celebrate?
10. What do I still want to accomplish?
11. What role does passion play in my life?
12. Other suggested topics may be found in the resource materials listed on pages 7 & 8 of this guide.



13. See the book list under Resources on page 12 for more book study ideas.
14. New Mexico has a network of Elder Circles and their list on the web comes from a list of 8 years of circling: <http://www.can-nm.org/Discussion%20topics.htm>
15. Elder Circles in Tuscon have used the following topics: Approaches to end of life; Embracing your legacy; Conscious listening; Who am I becoming?; Planning your funeral; Inner wisdom; Wills; Ethical wills; advanced health care directives; Mentoring; Forgiveness

Where to Recruit Participants

1. Group of friends and neighbors who are ready for the journey.
2. Your neighborhood coffee klatch.
3. Your faith community.
4. Advertise for members at your public library.
5. Recruit at assisted living facilities and retirement communities.

Role of the Facilitator

- Decide on the leadership structure of the Circle: A rotating facilitator, a permanent facilitator or some other form of facilitator structure.
- Facilitator plans content and agenda.
- Facilitator assures that Circle will open/close on time.
- Facilitator tries to be aware of what is on the minds of participants and creates a direction around the needs of the moment.
- Facilitator allows time for feedback on how/if the circle is meeting the needs of all.



Other Resources



Books

- Books by Richard Leider, including *The Power of Purpose*; *Something to Live For: Finding Your Way in the Second Half of Life*; *Claiming Your Place at the Fire: Living The Second Half of your Life on Purpose*; and *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life*
- *The Second Half of Life* by Angeles Arrien
- *Spirituality and Aging* by Robert Atchley
- *Life Gets Better: The Unexpected Pleasures of Growing Older*, by Wendy Lustbader
- *The Little Book of Circle Processes*, by Kay Pranis
- *Secrets of Becoming A Late Bloomer: Staying Creative, Aware, and Involved in Mid-Life and Beyond* by Connie Goldman
- *Essential Writings* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind: The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old* by Deepak Chopra, M.D.

Books with Poetry or Stories that may be shared in the Circle

- *Beyond Forgiveness: Reflections on Atonement* edited by Phil Cousineau
- *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry* Edited by Stephen Mitchell
- *My Grandfather's Blessings* by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.
- *Kitchen Table Wisdom* by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.
- *Wisdom of the Elders: Sacred Native Stories of Nature* by David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson



Movies and DVDs

- Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth
- The Power of Forgiveness



Music

- Wisdom of the World
- Spring Hill Music



Wisdom Circles: A Bit of History

In his book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing®*, *A Profound New Vision for Growing Older*, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi gets our attention immediately with the fact that studies on childhood and adulthood have been the focus of many books and studies and no one has written or studied the third phase of life, ELDERHOOD. How can we move from “age-ing” to “sage-ing”?

He said: “A person has to be serious about wanting to harvest a lifetime. Most people are depressed when they get old because they have nothing to look forward to. And people are not wanting to face their mortality. So there is homework. You can’t become an elder without doing the homework.”

And so the idea of Wisdom Circles, and Elder Circles emerged. Here was a way to deal with life completion—overcome the denial of aging. Here was a way of creating together a place of safety and respect. Here was a way to **harvest our lives**. Kirkegaard said we live life forward, but we understand it backward. Harvesting your life is a way to look backward and forward.

Robert Butler called it life review: the practice of formally examining one’s past and noting its patterns, trends and lessons.

Older cultures knew about elderhood. Native Americans describe Elderhood, as “our work.” In the ceremony of initiation into elderhood, a circle of elders discusses what it means to become an elder of the tribe and how the years ahead will be a time of significant responsibility and contribution.

It is time to change this culture's story on aging. Today we can reclaim our voice in a **circle of elders**.

Today we can engage in dialogues of genuine depth. This is a place where the asking of questions is more crucial than getting answers...questions like:

- How can I pass on wisdom accumulated through my experiences?
- Who feels like "kin" to me?
- How can I share my interests and inspirations?

So it is time, as Richard Leider says in his book of the same name to "*claim our place at the fire.*" "The new elder," he says, is seeking answers to these questions: Who am I? Where do I belong? What do I care about? What is my life's purpose? It is about elder stories. And elder stories, my story, your story, our story, is what Wisdom Circles are all about.

Wisdom Circles are about the third phase of life—after childhood and adulthood comes elderhood. In her book, *The Second Half of Life*, Angelus Arrien says, "We have 4 frontiers to face:

- Retirement: from what, toward what
- Becoming a mentor, steward or grandparent
- Coping with the natural challenges of maintaining the health of an aging body
- Mortality: losing our loved ones, and the inevitability of our own death."

Wisdom Circles...a safe, respectful place for the new elder to journey from older to elder, from a doing-person to a being-person, and from age-ing to sage-ing®.



About Sage-ing® International

Sage-ing International is a community of elders and elders-to-be around the globe, whose mission is to create a world which respects and honors elders by:

- 🌱 Offering a new vision of elderhood as a time of learning, growth, and contribution
- 🌱 Supporting each other through our website, educational materials, Chapters and Wisdom Circles, in growing into the role of sage – the wise elders so desperately needed in our families, our neighborhoods, and our world.
- 🌱 Offering workshops and creating inspirational and educational materials.
- 🌱 Empowering elders to serve their communities and the world through Sage-ing training.

Check out the many resources we have available on our website: www.sage-ing.org, and take advantage of our free six months introductory membership offer.

