[[1]](#footnote-1)[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Dialogue Approach of *The Circle of Seven*
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**Biographical Introduction**

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1995, six women gathered with the intention of creating a Rites of Passage Program for women going through transition.1 The women soon realized they were going through their own transitions which forced an uncertain redirection of their purpose. One Circle member, Glennifer, explains, “After we realized that we had called the circle into being for a purpose that was not yet clear, and we were comfortable with not knowing what the purpose was, we began experimenting2”.The women began sharing their lives through dialogue, listening openly to perceive an emerging underlying discovery. What manifested was a transformational dialogue. The women routinely convened, to evolve and refine their dialogue practice, which continued for fourteen years. Six women create the Circle of Seven, upon its conception, the eldest being seventy-three and the youngest thirty six. They are Barbara Cecil, Anne Dosher, Beth Jandernoa, Leslie lanes, Serena Newby, and Glennifer Gillespie; “The seventh place represents the presence of the Great Spirit and provides an occasional space for invited guests3”.

Glennifer was no stranger to circle work, experiencing several circles during her replete time in Cape Town, South Africa. Glennifer remarks, “While what we were creating was new in the late 70s, everywhere I go nowadays I notice the phenomenon of women’s circles[[3]](#footnote-3)”. Another Circle member, Anne Dosher, was born in England and bore witness to World Wars I and II. Experiencing two World Wars, one in which she served the Royal Air Force, she questioned, “How could we have done this? Why couldn’t we have talked about this?[[4]](#footnote-4)” She recalls, “In my contemplation and study of these questions, it became clear to me that every societal process I knew of started with an informal conversation in which men and women – young or old – were witnessed and, “heard into speech”, sharing their dreams and hopes for making a difference around something they cared about[[5]](#footnote-5)”. Anne Dosher is respectfully named the Elder of the Circle of Seven.

Each of the women bring a unique asset to the Circle. Leslie Lanes is the founder of the Rose Circle mentoring Network, which offers programs for engaging and empowering youth[[6]](#footnote-6). Serena, living and teaching in various cultures, offers the ability to bridge cultural differences[[7]](#footnote-7). Beth has over 20 years experience with leadership development and dialogue in business, healthcare, education, government and community nonprofits[[8]](#footnote-8). Barbara has pioneered the discipline of dialogue in multiple specialties, and interestingly, was the Executive-Director to the American-Soviet Film Initiative, established to dissolve stereotypes sustained by the media[[9]](#footnote-9).

**Thought on Dialogue**

Examination of the Circle of Seven’s intensive practice allows for certain inferences to their approach to dialogue. Initially, they create an environment conducive to the ease of dialogue, selecting a setting deemed peaceful by each member while affording minimal disturbances. This allows an energy to emerge and encourages something much more profound. Glennifer explains, “The circle gatherings are one of the places where the transformation of consciousness is being intensified[[10]](#footnote-10)”. Through their practice they discovered that dialogue can be used to access a, “more fundamental note that is the being-to-being connection[[11]](#footnote-11)”. They specify, “There’s a circle around us, permeating and holding us all; that energy informs us if we are receptive, affecting our understanding, our feelings, and our whole expression[[12]](#footnote-12)”.

Foundational to their practice is their holistic belief that everything is deeply interconnected and we are all inseparably a part of one unified whole[[13]](#footnote-13) . They share, “One of our circle practices consists of inventing processes on the spot that seem to address whatever an individual might be wrestling with, or sheds light on how this fits with what is going on in the larger world[[14]](#footnote-14)”. Skilled use of dialogue moves the individuals to a state where they discover the sense of interconnectedness directly. David Bohm, a recognized physicist and dialogue theorist, shares this understanding affirming that, “Each particular thing in its turn may affect and influence its respective background and substructure[[15]](#footnote-15)”.The Circle explain dialogue as a means to midwife change, “Reshaping the world by shifting your attention[[16]](#footnote-16)”. Recognizing this deeper foundational ground of unity; they understand dialogue as their core method for moving through the deeper stages of circle work. Their seventh member, the Great Spirit, represents this holistic presence.

 The Circle of Seven describe their process as charging the container, discovering a collective presence, and practicing unconditional witnessing. With the setting prepared, Charging the container is the next task. Dialogue practitioner, Dr. William Isaacs, who has worked with Glennifer, Beth and Barbara, describes the container as conditions we can create, “Under which a rich field for interaction is more likely to appear[[17]](#footnote-17)”.The women start by ritualizing the space in which they will work. They may light candles or ring a Tibetan bowl; however, they clarify, “We always rediscover how to begin, it’s not as though we do exactly the same thing every time[[18]](#footnote-18)”. Following the ritualizing of space, they sit silently together for a period of time, explaining, “The silence is deference to a larger pattern of life unfolding[[19]](#footnote-19)”. During the period of silence, Glennifer furthers, each member drops, “more fully into the field together[[20]](#footnote-20)”.

Once the space is ritualized, their dialogue practice begins by sharing an experience; “We open the space through one person working through something in themselves, or two of us doing something challenging or deepening together, or all of us participating in a meaningful or ground-breaking conversation[[21]](#footnote-21)”.Dialogue is utilized to create a collective experience among the circle, they explain, “We use our own storylines, situations, and connections…trusting the seemingly personal situation has meaning beyond (ourselves)[[22]](#footnote-22)”. Through this period of dialogue, their experience evolves; they explain, “Noticing our initial experiences lets us drop into a deeper place[[23]](#footnote-23)”. Glennifer shares, “After a while, we find that we have opened up a field of creativity and power which is more than just the sum of ourselves[[24]](#footnote-24)”.

Further charging the container, the Circle of Seven utilize symbols; they explain, “Enactment of some kind brings real-time energy into the room[[25]](#footnote-25)”.The Circle share the example of Liz, who they urged to use objects in the room to symbolize her life as she shared her story. Liz placed objects in the room, “in relationship to one another to represent her life and to indicate the different energy streams that were shaping the different parts of her life[[26]](#footnote-26)”. The Circle of Seven then ask Liz to make connecting lines to the objects where she desired her life to be more connected[[27]](#footnote-27)”. The Circle explains, “The energy comes into the room very directly when you’re working with symbol[[28]](#footnote-28)”. This representation of life, manipulated symbolically, the Circle explain, “Is a way of getting out of your head”, what Liz did, “it came from her heart, a desire[[29]](#footnote-29)”. In Liz’s story, the goals she shared that she desired, ultimately materialized. The Circle attributes, “What we realized was that she had set the whole pattern symbolically in the circle, as though there was something already present that wanted to come through; it needed expression, and then it could manifest, which it did, exactly[[30]](#footnote-30)”.

The charged container facilitates the emergence of the collective presence, a skill the Circle of Seven have been experimenting with for years. The Circle describes this presence as a collective field that they share and an energetic knowingness. The women refer to the collective presence as an, “Inner wisdom figure[[31]](#footnote-31)”, and, “A special place inside from which insight and understanding comes[[32]](#footnote-32)”. One of the Circle shares that, while her husband was dying, three other unknowing Circle members made phone calls to her; they did not know about her husband, but she believes somehow they did.[[33]](#footnote-33) The Women of the Circle explain, “We respond to an impulse, and the impulse is part of something far larger, which later on makes sense[[34]](#footnote-34)”. The collective presence is a result of the Circle’s use of dialogue which enables subsequent possibilities for a more generative order of dialogue.

The transition to the Collective Presence requires an environment of truthfulness and suspension of judgment. Glennifer asserts, “Truth-telling, about self, about one another, without judgment, but with the desire to serve, enables the process of dialogue to create what is named the ‘Collective Presence’[[35]](#footnote-35)”. The Circle of Seven explain that personalities need to be set aside so that they can discover the essential self. Seeing the essential self is understanding others as people who are working through their lives, making mistakes and resolving issues. The Circle clarifies; “If nobody gets in the way with their own agendas or our personality scenarios, then a possibility can fulfill itself; once we get over the threshold, there is a certain richness-a collective listening capacity that is humbling[[36]](#footnote-36)”. Dialogue, attending to these qualities, will foster collective discussion and understanding. It is the belief of the Circle that dialogue, practiced under these assertions, can be used by other circle groups to achieve this presence.

Dialogue can be generative; however, its nature requires an audience. The Circle of Seven believe that a small group collectively listening offers a unique dynamic. The Circle explains that, “In the small group, individuals move into the background and the collective being comes into the foreground[[37]](#footnote-37)”.Dialogue can become generative when expressed in the presence of unconditional witnessing within this collective presence of the group. The Circle explains, “The quality of witnessing … is personal identification with the source of the circle; something like: the eyes through which you see, the heart through which you feel, the ears with which you listen[[38]](#footnote-38)”. The expression of dialogue, while being witnessed unconditionally, will allow the emergence of deeper expression. The Circle explains, “There was something already present that wanted to come through, it needed expression and then it could manifest, which it did[[39]](#footnote-39)”. Utilizing the energy of the small group, dialogue can then be a doorway to the exposure of underlying realities. One member explains, “I worked with what was inside me in the arena of the circle, and it changed my experience, ‘out there’[[40]](#footnote-40)”.

The Circle of Seven believe honest circle work will help to create a, “World aligned with life’s creative impulse, generosity, and deep design[[41]](#footnote-41)”. The women assert that, “When there is an awareness of the greater will of life, which is beautiful, coherent, and ever present; when that can come through it has a big effect on things[[42]](#footnote-42)”. Their refined practice demonstrates that skilled dialogue can create, generate, and alter ourselves and our world. Otto Scharmer concludes, “Their experience confirms that integrated people, both men and women, are the inspiration for an integrated society, and that the field evoked by their presence and the work they did together in the circle has the capacity to hold and transform their lives, and the lives of those to whom they are connected[[43]](#footnote-43)”. David Bohm is quoted,"...it is proposed that a form of free dialogue may well be one of the most effective ways of investigating the crisis which faces society, and indeed the whole of human nature and consciousness today. Moreover, it may turn out that such a form of free exchange of ideas and information is of fundamental relevance for transforming culture and freeing it of destructive misinformation, so that creativity can be liberated[[44]](#footnote-44).

It can be concluded that dialogue has the potential to impact individuals when shared while practicing suspension and genuine truthfulness in a supportive setting. Recognition of this ability for change to the individual potentiated by effective dialogue can be understood in a larger scheme. Respecting the foundational concept of unity held by the Circle of Seven allows for the suggestion that dialogue can therefore impact our society, our country, and our world. If such skilled dialogue can create individual changes, collectively we can expect more substantial outcomes. Barbara Cecil summarizes, there are, “Subtle shifts possible in a group sensitized to finer levels of perception and thought[[45]](#footnote-45)”. The Circle of Seven demonstrate that dialogue can be utilized in a skillful manner to afford us the opportunity to discover these finer levels for ourselves.

**Theory and Practice**

The Circle of Seven’s work readied them to share their experience with others. Active participants in Organizational and Leadership conferences, they were approached by young women requesting to share the Circle’s accomplishments. Barbara and Glennifer affirm, “Our inner readiness, together with this request, converged in the inception of a woman’s mentorship program[[46]](#footnote-46)”. Their subsequent work was based with the Ashland Institute, funded by The Fetzer Institute and Generon Counseling. The goal was to create a program which utilized dialogue for mentoring, with a unique distinction. Mentoring, traditionally one-directional, has a skilled coach who guides a lesser skilled recipient. Mentoring, based on the Circle of Seven’s experience, is based on mutual learning[[47]](#footnote-47). With respect to the knowledge of the wise elders, there is a belief for reciprocal learning. Barbara and Glennifer explain, “If the senior generations remain closed to what is emerging through young people, innovation and fresh thinking will not appear[[48]](#footnote-48)”.

Four programs were created, the pilot was held in Oregon in 1999, the others took place between 2000 and 2001[[49]](#footnote-49). Barbara, Beth, and Glennifer ran the programs with Serena serving as the elder. The fourth program was held in Cape Town, South Africa, and was run by three South African women who received coaching. This fourth program was established to determine if the mentoring programs would be effective across cultures. The resulting research revealed both the Oregon and Cape Town programs to be equally successful. Barbara and Glennifer modestly acknowledge the success of the mentor programs sharing, “We believe that the transformational potential of the circles was fulfilled less because if what we did with the participants than because of the natural effect of the specific environment, or field, in which they came to rest[[50]](#footnote-50)”.

Leslie Lanes has remained close to her work with the Circle of Seven. She is a member of the Millionth Circle Initiative, which describes itself as, “Grass roots, international volunteer organization of women who believe that circles are the means through which world consciousness will change[[51]](#footnote-51)”. They hold events, provide links to literature, and welcome new circles to join. Circle practices are recreated, dialogue is shared among participants sitting in a circle in a conducive environment. Participants are guided to respect the principles of suspension and genuine speaking. The Millionth Circle Initiative was inspired by the text, *The Millionth Circle*, by Jean Shinoda Bolen. Bolen and the Initiative share the hypothesis that, “When a critical number of people change how they think and behave, the culture will also, and a new era begins[[52]](#footnote-52)”.The Initiative offers guidelines for aspiring circle participants, they are as follows:

• Create a circle.
• Consider it a sacred space.
• One person speaks at a time.
• Speak and listen from the heart.
• Encourage and welcome diverse points of view.
• Listen with discernment instead of judgment.
• Share leadership and resources.
• Decide together how decisions will be made.
• Work toward consensus when possible.
• Offer experience instead of advice.
• When in doubt or need, pause and silently ask for guidance.
• Decide together what is to be held in confidence.
• Speak from your own experience and beliefs rather than speaking for others.
• Open and close the circle by hearing each voice. (Check-ins and check-outs.)

Anne Dosher, respectfully named the Elder to the Circle of Seven, is a recipient to this title for several organizations. The World Café additionally names Anne, Elder and ‘Guardian of the Soul’ describing her as, “A guide, mentor and inspiration for the World Café and other related dialogue initiatives around the globe[[53]](#footnote-53)”. Anne is credited with introducing, “The special kind of collaborative listening that has become the hallmark of The World Café conversations[[54]](#footnote-54)”. The World Café is both a text and an online community, Anne being a key figure to both.

The World Cafe online community defines itself as, “A powerful social technology for engaging people in conversations that matter, offering an effective antidote to the fast-paced fragmentation and lack of connection in today’s world[[55]](#footnote-55)”. It is a, “Global, conversational movement, with active participants and practitioners in business and organizational settings on six continents[[56]](#footnote-56)”. Their client list is extensive and includes world-renowned corporations including: Apple, Coca-Cola, Google, Hewlett-Packard, Lego and NASA[[57]](#footnote-57).The World Café lists its design principles which reflect the methods used by The Circle of Seven[[58]](#footnote-58), they are as follows:

* Set the context
* Create a hospitable space
* Explore questions that matter
* Encourage everyone’s contribution
* Connect diverse perspectives
* Listen together for patterns and insights
* Share collective discoveries

 Additionally, the online community is an interest to the Institute for Social Innovation at Fielding Graduate University. The World Café boasts, “Ongoing collaborative conversations continue to provide a focus on The World Café as a practice to be researched and a method for research[[59]](#footnote-59)”.

The text, ‘The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter’, offers a guide to the process for fostering collaborative dialogue and includes real world stories of the application of this practice. Claudia Chender, a law student at the University of Victoria Law School, British Columbia, shares her application of dialogue to diffuse a hostile Iraq War debate at the college. Marianne Bojer, a founder of Pioneers for Change, discusses her work in helping rebuild the African Network of Women with Disabilities. These, and other real world stories, exemplify the application of the Circle of Seven’s process as reproducible.

The Circle of Seven refined their use of dialogue into a delineated pathway which can guide others. The potential of application of their work is exemplified by the various initiatives, from personal mentoring, to global movements. Many of these practices have been documented, demonstrating the effectiveness of employing the Circle’s dialogue process. The widespread applications demonstrate the potential to utilize dialogue for transformational purposes as recognized by the Circle of Seven. Ongoing research, similar to that at the Institute for Social Innovation, will reveal the future potentials that lie in skilled use of dialogue.

 **Questions for Reflection**

What supportive and limiting conditions do groups find to be true in establishing a Collective Presence through dialogue as applied by the Circle of Seven?

Given the language of the Circle’s process might be perceived as too spiritual for mainstream applications, what alternative ways of framing or describing these processes exist for groups?

Is dialogue always an effective group means to improve our understanding and thinking? Might it occasionally prove ineffective, or possibly counter-productive?

Can the Circle of Seven’s dialogue process be applied across cultures including those that are more individualistic or more collectivist? What means exist within those groups to adapt this dialogue process to better serve such cultural contexts?

 **Recommended Readings**

**The Circle of Seven’s Works**

Barbara Coffman and Glennifer Gillespie, “Mentorship Circles: Women Coming Into Their Own” Accessed 1st, May 2014

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