



## 4.2 Circle of Presence – building capacity for Authentic Collective Wisdom

I have used the concept *Circle of Presence* several times already, so it is time to clarify exactly what I mean by it. A *Circle of Presence* is:

- any group or team (around 4 to 12 people)
- that comes together regularly over a longer period of time
- using circle practice as the core methodology
- for the purpose of becoming ever more present (in the four areas: myself, the others, the group and potential)
- in order to attain collective wisdom around a certain topic or question.

Scharmer writes (p.410-411) of this as one of the principles in the U-process: “create circles in which you hold one another in the highest future intention”.

In a *Circle of Presence*, the process is walked step by step, using circle practice to gradually build a strong container that can hold anger, joy and grief, but also reflection, new insights, analysis and a lot of cognitive understanding. This container is built of love and commitment, and that makes it is strong, vulnerable, flexible and resilient. This capacity of a Circle of Presence is not built all at once. It unfolds over time, through different layers and phases (see *I and Us*). We need practice to expand our capacity to embrace ever more in our awareness, and deepen our skill in opening ourselves to receiving ever more. These layers, phases and inner movements are all entwined, interconnected and interdependent.

In addition to the personal flexibility and grounding needed (*I and Myself*), we are called to develop new human capacities on the collective level: strong group fields that can hold and contain the powerful energies called for to deal with high levels of complexity, with chaos and sudden changes in the environment. The collective potential that a group can manifest is directly proportional to the amount of available, free energy that is not stuck in any kind of downloading. In groups with a lot of passion about their

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issue or purpose, there is generally more at stake for participants, so emotions can get very charged and situations get stuck easily. Therefore, groups with a compelling vision or great passion will do themselves a big favour by investing time in building strong, yet flexible and resilient containers that can hold the fire of emotions, which they can then use to forge new collective wisdom.

This so-called energetic container can be seen as the body/mind structure of a group, a concept I borrow from LaChapelle. Learning and practicing clearing and healing this body/mind/soul structure on a group level, so it can be available and open for its potential, is a whole new domain. When my body, mind and soul are aligned I feel joyful, wise and relaxed. We need the same thing for groups: a transparent, aligned group field that does not lose any energy in stuck patterns or habits, but that has all its attention and energy free for the emergence of its collective wisdom.

We are in sore need of more authentic collective wisdom - wisdom that springs from integrating body-based inner knowing with the cognitive capacity of our minds; a knowing that arises from the synergy of our shared capacity and potential. We all need a circle(s), because we are, by definition, as blind to our own unconscious parts as we are to our true gifts, and more importantly because we each hold a piece of the puzzle that only together will offer a deeper understanding and a way forward for our shared question or issue.

## **Collective intelligence and collective wisdom**

I use the term *collective wisdom* intentionally, as I see it as different from collective intelligence. Even the true meaning of collective intelligence is not an intelligence that is additive, as in 'two know more than one'. George Por speaks of 'a connected intelligence'; an intelligence that combines and makes us more 'co-intelligent'. Yet there is still something missing in this definition, when any kind of terrorist group can – and probably does - use this kind of collective intelligence.

I see wisdom as intelligence linked with love, or intelligence that is life-affirming, realising that we are embedded in a wider context – of other people, other cultures, other creatures - and acting from that awareness. Again, it is not a 'one plus one makes two' operation, but an emergent wisdom that arises when we put our individual gifts and knowing together in a vibrant mix. Then we become a group or team that is 'co-wise'.

Wisdom in this regard is quite different from knowledge. I once heard Julio Olalla make a clear distinction between knowledge and wisdom, defining knowledge as knowing the answers, and wisdom as asking the questions.

There is a lot of value in that definition, and later (part 7.1) I will have more to say on the topic of finding inspiring guiding questions.



## Learning and healing

To some it might seem that any group process, which makes room for emotions and personal stories is a therapy group. This is not true. The purpose of a *Circle of Presence* is not healing in itself, but learning to become present on ever wider and deeper levels in order to be co-wise on the issue at hand. Any healing that happens is incidental. In a therapy group, the process is guided by a therapist, who is (hopefully) expert in such matters. In a *Circle of Presence* there need be no expert on emotional dynamics - although sometimes that can be helpful. It suffices to be a curious, empathic and respectful human being to make it work. The process builds and deepens mutual trust, respect and love over time – all in order to make available the wisdom related to the shared purpose, and not just for the sake of being together.

All steps, all movements along the way in this journey are needed for both healing and learning, simultaneously. Everyone will support and help, and receive in reciprocity. The learning happens as people travel together on the journey. Each one of the distinctive movements outlined so far has a

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part to play in clearing away what is separating us from what is: phenomena as they are, without any interpretation. We simply cannot move from our conditioned habits in a group to the experience of collective wisdom in one step. It takes learning, practice, commitment, compassion, and a lot of love. All our conditioned feeling, thinking, doing has separated us and divided us. It has veiled the interrelatedness and complexity. As LaChapelle states: "A considerable portion of any group's energy is devoted to the remediation of these various veils." If we want collective wisdom to emerge, each member needs to come to this ever deepening inner experience of wholeness or interconnectivity. Conceptual knowing alone will not be enough.

Being a *Circle of Presence* is at a far remove from sitting together and enjoying each other's company - although that is important too. It is about growing, individually and collectively, in leadership capacity. It is about thinking and acting in quite diverse ways. It is about a collective inquiry into a topic that is of interest to all. Accordingly, every step in this process is crucial, every move is important. Becoming a group that shares deep mutual respect and love – whilst pursuing its purpose - is not easily accomplished, because we so quickly slip back into our habitual patterns.

## Friendship

Bill Torbert talks about 'friendship as a developmental force', building on the notion that friends mostly share similar values and related ways of thinking and reasoning. Participants in a *Circle of Presence* tend to see each other as friends after some time, because of the shared intention to become as present as possible, through and in the circle (practice), and because any sharing and reflection opens out onto human bonding, a level where we are all equal in being humans. The deep trust that evolves from there can be quite exceptional for some participants, hence the tendency to become friends.

This friendship is also more than being a bunch of 'good old friends'. Participants in the kind of circles we are concerned with here also share a certain recognition and resonance, a deep trust in the unfolding of our future story. There is a shared inner knowing that we are in a time of deep transition on the planet and we all want to learn to be present in service of this. The resonance is about being on a learning journey and constantly reflecting on where our actions and thoughts originate. This makes for open minds and wide open hearts. Whenever I sense and see this resonance it reassures me and nurtures my soul. I suspect that when our souls come into deeper resonance, unexpected and wondrous things can happen.

## Balance

Collective presencing places much more emphasis on the *yin* side of individual and collective unfolding than is our habit. We focus more on the practical, holding and enabling energies: compassionate action born of love in every moment. And I do mean 'in every moment' - not only in meditation or for the duration of a workshop, but *in every moment of our lives*. Including work. Including when we do the dishes together, when we need to make an urgent appointment, when we are in a hurry or confronted with a conflict of interest. This energy is like the mother holding the child in the field of her love. She creates and maintains the conditions in which the child can grow. When that field is rather open and cleared, the child flourishes and the mother knows what to do. A *Circle of Presence*, over time and with commitment to its purpose, becomes this holding space, the container in which collective wisdom can be born and grow in service of the intention, purpose or inquiry that the group is gathered around.

The *Circle of Presence* is about building a collective container – and everything it takes to get there, both individually and together – so that Authentic Collective Wisdom can emerge around a shared topic; a collective wisdom that will be totally unique to this particular group. Related to the work of Scharmer, this can be seen as the inner dimension of the left side of the U-curve. Later on we will look at the steps and elements of the inner dimension entailed in becoming a *Circle of Creation*, which is more related to the movement up the right side the U-curve, transitioning into manifestation. In a way, I am seeking here to articulate the inner, subtle and then collective dimensions encountered when moving through the U process.