



The Way of Council Practice

-Adapted from audiotape by Joan Halifax Being with Dying Council Practice

Council is a practice where we, as listeners, develop a quality of listening that elicits wisdom from the one who is speaking. To be in Council with someone means to bear witness to his or her story, to his or her suffering.

To be in Council, we listen with a kind of deep devotion to the speaker, not judging, practicing absolute tolerance and non-prejudice, as though we, ourselves, are listening from within the speaker.

Often, Council begins in silence, giving a chance for each person to drop down to the truth in his or her own heart.

Council honors the wisdom of the circle. Groups of First Nations Elders sit in circle in a position of wisdom. Council allowed the Quakers practice in devout listening and speaking spontaneously from their hearts. There is even mention of Council in Homer's Iliad.

You can be in Council with one person or one thousand people. Council is a practice where each person can speak clearly and listen deeply. In Council, each sits so that he or she can see the others. In Council, a shift is made from busyness to intimacy and truth. In Council, connection is made with the spirit of place and the sacredness of space.

A Native American teacher suggests that a lighted candle, (or a flower, a rock, or some other chosen symbol) be placed in the center of the space. This symbol represents the Children's Fire. The Children's Fire is the fire of our own innocent heart. As devout listeners, we do not speak across the children's fire. The Children's Fire is there to remind us of who we really are: the spirit part of our experience.

A talking piece (a stone, talking stick, family heirloom, or another object of choice) helps to keep each person in Council on track. Whoever has the talking piece has the others' undivided attention and devout listening, as each practices the "The Four Intentions of Circle".



Hospice Volunteering and “The Four Intentions of Circle”

Adapted from Zimmerman’s Way of Council and Joan Halifax’s tape Council Practice

“In working with dying people, fundamentally, we are sitting in Council all of the time.

We are bearing witness.

We are practicing devout listening. We are listening from the heart.

We are listening without judging.

We are listening to what is being said, and also, to what has been left unsaid.

--Joan Halifax

LISTENING FROM THE HEART

The quality of listening is what makes a Council successful. The Quakers call this quality of listening from the heart “true devout listening”.

When we listen to others, we can remind ourselves to contemplate the possibility that the speaker may not be here tomorrow. This will bring a quality of attentiveness, respect, transparency, care, and receiving unconditionally whatever this person is saying. Listening with intense and loving devotion to the speaker can elicit a much deeper truth from the speaker.

In the actual form of Council practice, the option to interrupt the speaker is removed. In this way, someone can speak in a very deep and true way without being afraid of being cut off.

In addition, the listener (the one who is listening from the heart and not from the ears) has the chance to relax into a very open and spacious quality of listening.

Bearing witness by listening from the heart brings presence to the relationship and to the circle as a whole.

SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

Remember to speak from the heart, not from the head. Imagine your words or your silence emerging from the mid-chest. This promotes a feeling of expansion and a sense of greater connectedness to another or others in the circle as a whole.

Speaking from the heart creates the context for transformation and nourishes the speaker as well as the listener.

Simplicity and passion support heartfelt expression. Speaking from the heart means saying something that really matters and this, in turn, will serve the speaker as well as the others.



BEING OF LEAN EXPRESSION

Being of lean expression is about communication. It takes practice, but we can learn how to come to the point of our story-telling in a clear, deep and efficient way.

We can remind ourselves that we are connected with each other and that it is important for each to have the time and space to speak. Create a situation of deep consideration.

Being of lean expression is an art. Pause and take a centering breath to locate what your heart wants to say. Be concise and of lean expression by finding words or images that enliven your story or contribution.

SPONTANEITY

Set your intention not to rehearse ahead of time what it is you want to say. Rehearsing or comparing what you have to say to the previous speakers locates you in your head, not your heart.

Preparing as others are speaking stops your ability to listen attentively and creates a disconnection from the speaker.

Freed from the need to prepare or compare, the ordinary mind is more likely to step out of the way and let the intuitive voice speak.

Trust that what you have to say “in the moment” will be exactly and uniquely what the other(s) needs to hear.

Listen to the speaker and then clear your mind once they have finished. When it is your turn, pause, breathe, and ask yourself “what is to be spoken now?” Wait for an internal response.

Scan your body and note the sensations and locations of feelings. Wait for an image, story, or statement to arise and note your willingness to speak it aloud. If the feeling is yes, speak, being of lean expression. If you have doubts and fears ask yourself:

-Will speaking this serve me?

-Will speaking this serve the other(s)“

-Will speaking this serve the greater good (the larger relationship)?

Move from the position of “I” and listen to the wisdom of the circle.

Authentic, attentive listening creates a unity of spirit beyond the sum of its parts, whether it is with a person who is dying, one who is grieving, or a circle of which you are part.



CONFIDENTIALITY

As volunteers practicing “The Way of Council” and the “Four Intentions of Circle” we create sacred containers and spaces with those we serve. If words are spoken outside the sacred space, it causes the sacred container to leak and trust is broken.

