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INTRODUCTION

Everything I see, hear, touch, feel, taste, speak, think, imagine, is completing a perfect circle God has drawn.

Meister Eckhart, 13th century

Ask me to list the benefits of Circlework, and I hardly know where to start—there are so many. But the one that comes to mind first is, without doubt, *connection*. Circlework is nothing if not a practice that connects us deeply—with others, with ourselves, and with Spirit.

Most people would agree that connection is a basic human need. Yet these days, it can be hard to come by. Vivek Murthy, who was the US Surgeon General from 2014 to 2017, has been sounding the alarm. “Loneliness,” he writes, “is a growing health epidemic. We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s. Today, over 40 percent of adults in America report feeling lonely, and research suggests that the real number may well be higher.”

As a physician, Murthy is keenly aware of the devastating effects this is having on our health:

During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness. . . . Loneliness and weak social connections are associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that

associated with obesity. . . . Loneliness is also associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety. . . . For our health and our work, it is imperative that we address the loneliness epidemic quickly.¹

In part, this epidemic relates to the radical changes in family structures we've witnessed in recent decades. In 1970, 17 percent of US households were comprised of a single person. Back then, this was considered a shocking number, yet today, it has jumped to 28 percent. Thirty-five million Americans now live alone.

Yet simply widening our social circle is not the solution. After all, we all experienced what it's like to be surrounded by people yet feel profoundly lonely, invisible and isolated. Ultimately, what matters far more than the quantity of our social connections is their quality. Do our relationships have the intimacy, depth, and authenticity we crave? That is the real question.

For many people, the answer is no. Many of the participants in my circles say that for much of their life, they felt starved for intimacy—not sexual intimacy, but that sense of deep connectedness that links heart to heart and soul to soul. And yet, most of them aren't lonely, in the obvious ways. They have family, friends and community—and yet . . .

When they first discover Circlework, they're often amazed. "I never knew there was a place like this," they say. By which they mean, a place that feels both utterly safe and profoundly sacred. A place where they can come out of hiding and receive the deep nourishment that only true connection can provide.

It's sad to think that in our society, such places are so rare that many people despair of ever finding them. It doesn't have to be this way. Together, we have the power to initiate change, so that future generations won't have to suffer the same kind of loneliness that many take for granted today.

If you dream of experiencing deeper intimacy, authenticity, connection and love, not just with a single individual but with an entire

community, I want to assure you that what you long for is indeed possible. It is not just a romantic vision or a utopian fantasy. On the contrary, it's your birthright—a birthright that Circlework is dedicated to helping you reclaim. Here, a woman called Lisette talks about this:

Circlework is life-altering. It's completely outside of any experience I've ever had. It provides a deep kind of nourishment by breaking through the isolation so many people experience in our society. It quenches a longing for connection that so many people feel but that's really hard to find in our world.

I believe we have to experience this connection in order to really know what we're looking for. If we don't get a chance to experience and practice how to come together in this very loving and compassionate and also extremely real way, we can't expect to know how to do that in the larger world.

I personally needed to be in the circle long enough to really believe there really was another option. It's hard to envision this possibility and see it as part of our future when you haven't experienced it. The circle has given me that experience, the experience of a true alternative, and out of that, hope has come.

I, too, find that Circlework gives me hope. Whenever I'm overcome with despair for our crazy world, it restores my faith by showing me the extraordinary potential that lies within us all. More times than I can say, I've been awed by the powerful presence of the sacred that arises in our circles and by the profound encounters that occur. Surely no cathedral can match the beauty of a love-infused circle! Here, we feel the nearness and presence of Spirit and catch glimpses of the sacred feminine as she gazes through the eyes of each woman. Yet in this process, religion plays no part——there are no beliefs to adopt or dogmas to embrace.

I personally feel called to work primarily with women. I love creating opportunities, only too rare in our world, for women to rediscover the true meaning of sisterhood. I believe everyone benefits when women

know their worth and have a strong voice. That said, I view Circlework as a practice, not just for women but for all humans. Men need circles just as much as women do—perhaps more so. I've seen how much they benefit from Circlework, and look forward to the day when every community has fabulous circles for men and women alike.

We usually join groups in hopes of feeling better, however we define that—more peaceful, perhaps, or more centered, skilled, or confident. But for many of the women I work with, that isn't enough. Of course they too want to feel good—who doesn't? But they are also acutely aware of the suffering that surrounds them and the perils our world is facing. Many are mothers who are worried about the future of their children. And so, they are asking themselves: How can I make a difference? How can I be a force for healing in this world? How can I be of service? They want to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives, but they also want to help create a more peaceful world for future generations. In Circlework, they find a tool that helps them walk their path in balance and joy.

My Healing Journey

I've been training circle leaders for over three decades now. But when did I myself first experience the healing power of the circle? As I consider this question, I remember an experience I had over forty years ago, in my early twenties.

I had joined an ongoing therapy group for men and women. Like most therapy groups, we too sat in a circle. However, the significance of the circle was never mentioned, nor did we give any conscious thought to the form we were using. Still, in hindsight, I see how essential the presence of the circle was to the healing I received there.

To create spaces that are safe, sacred, and conducive to healing, we need not gather in a circle. But for reasons that will become obvious throughout this book, circle gatherings are ideally suited to the task. Just as a good hammer makes a carpenter's job much easier, the circle is a tool perfectly suited to the creation of sacred space.

At the time, I was experimenting with many different therapeutic modalities. Keenly aware of my own woundedness, I felt like the real me was hidden most of the time. Like many young people, I was both intensely social and profoundly lonely. Shy and insecure, I longed to break free in the worst way. Yet at the same time, I was terrified of showing up authentically.

But why did I feel the need to hide my true self? When I asked myself that question, a very small, scared voice replied, "Because I don't trust people." I knew this voice had a lot of power over me. And while it claimed to protect me, I could see it was keeping me isolated and alone.

So one evening, I arrived at our therapy group determined to speak honestly about my fears. It wasn't easy—I longed to bolt out the door, never to be seen again. Overwhelmed with shame, I avoided looking anyone in the eye. But I had made a commitment to myself that I was determined to keep. And so, I stayed, and I spoke.

When I was finished, the therapist asked whether he might lead me on a little inner journey. "Sure," I said.

I no longer recall his words, only that somehow, he helped me explore the source of my fears. Like many children, I'd spent several painful years as an outcast in school. Yet this, I now realized, was merely the tip of a major iceberg. Images began welling up of cruelty and violence that weren't sourced in my personal experience. Rather, they reflected the trauma of growing up as a Jew in postwar Germany. Children are like sponges, and I had absorbed all kinds of horrific images and stories that I had no way of processing. And so, without even realizing it, I had lost all trust in my own kind.

"How about us?" my therapist asked gently. Weeping, unable to speak, I buried my face in my hands and shook my head. No, I didn't trust them, either. I didn't trust anyone.

If you had asked me prior to this evening whether I felt connected to the members of my therapy group, I would have said yes, I did. But now, I discovered that at the deepest level, the answer was no. After

all, connection requires trust, and in that regard, I was sorely lacking.

But when I realized that my distrust included this gathering of people from whom I had experienced nothing but kindness, I thought: "This is an intolerable way to live." There and then, I resolved to find out who my fellow humans really were. I took a deep breath.

Tear-streaked and terrified, I raised my head, turned to the group, and slowly looked them in the eye, one by one. The shutters of my heart were wide open, and I was allowing them to see me all the way to my core. But I also found I was seeing them in a new way, with greater clarity and without the interference of fear. This was the moment of turning. It was the moment of saying: "Yes, I am willing to see and be seen." Instead of running away, I was, for the first time, opting to show up. Instead of choosing the apparent safety of isolation and withdrawal, I was choosing intimacy and connection,

What I understand now—though I didn't then—is that our psyche perceives any circle of human beings (and as I mentioned, my therapy group was a circle of sorts) as a microcosm of the entire species. The power of the circle is such that even a small circle evokes the totality of the human community. So, as I turned to face the circle, I was taking a new look, not just at these individuals, but at my entire species.

What I saw, as I looked at these men and women, was that they were fully present: they were truly paying attention, truly interested. Instead of disdain or disgust, I saw caring and—yes—love. Some were crying. More than anything else, it was their evident compassion that broke down my defenses. I began to sob, and continued to grieve for weeks, not just for the pain I was carrying, but for the shame that had caused me to wall off my feelings, and for the terrible isolation in which I had lived in for so many years. And so, I began to heal my wounded relationship to the human race.

The Evolution of Circlework

It would be another decade before I myself would start leading circles. First, I had a lot more healing and growth to do, both in Europe and in

India, where I lived for several years, studying temple dance, meditation and Hindu philosophy.

By the time I came to the United States, the early 1980s had arrived. People—especially women—were hungry for new ways of gathering in community and exploring their inner life.

I too was filled with longing. Looking to the past, I saw the temples of the Indian priestesses whose ways I'd been studying. What, I wondered, might such temple spaces look like today? I imagined a place where women would tell stories, laugh and cry together, and feel deeply nourished by the authenticity of their connections.

My Western education had taught me how to communicate through words and how to facilitate the exchange of ideas and information. India, on the other hand, had taught me about those deeper levels of connection that require us to be present, not so much in our minds as in our hearts and bodies.

I knew nothing about circle leadership, at least not on a conscious level. What I did know, however, is that the key to feeling connected is open-heartedness. Also, I knew how often we use words to shield rather than uncover the heart. Talking, therefore, would not be enough. Rather, I wanted the process to include beautiful music, ritual, silence, touch and immersion in nature. Within a society addicted to incessant thinking, I wanted us to co-create a sanctuary where we could transcend our mind.

When you find yourself yearning for something that doesn't seem to exist, you have two options—give up, or attempt to manifest your dreams. I chose the latter. Since I couldn't find the kind of space I envisioned, I resolved to try and create it.

Thus, Circlework was born. My first circles had a much stronger focus on movement and dance than they currently do. Yet from the very start, all seven pillars of Circlework, as outlined on page 26, were present. I soon discovered how much I loved this work, and that many other women shared my yearning for a new kind of temple space.

The Work Grows

After I'd been leading circles for a few years, women started asking for training, so that they might share the process of Circlework with others. So in the 1990s, I began training groups of women.

It quickly became clear that many women who had the desire and capacity to bring the gifts of Circlework to their communities would be unable to afford the training without financial assistance. So in 2001, I founded the Institute for Circlework, a non-profit organization based in Ithaca, NY. Since its inception, the Institute for Circlework has provided scholarships to hundreds of trainees and has supported the evolution and practice of Circlework around the world.

Today, graduates of the Circlework Leadership Training are facilitating circles throughout North America, but also in India and Afghanistan, Kenya and Australia, Israel and Palestine, Germany, Italy and other countries. They include women from all walks of life—social workers, activists, corporate executives, religious leaders, therapists, counselors and health care workers. You can find them in schools and colleges, hospitals and prisons, community centers and corporations.

How Women are Using Circlework

- ◎ I lead a monthly circle for women business leaders and a monthly circle for women presidents.
- ◎ I lead two circles. One is a women's support circle. The second focuses specifically on sexuality. The women describe the circle as a haven. A few who have moved away in the course of the last years have told me that this is the thing they miss the most.
- ◎ I lead a circle for parents of kids who have learning disabilities of various kinds and are having a hard time in the mainstream schools.

- ⊙ I'm a minister. I do all of my small group work in circles. I'm also moving towards bringing circle dances to our contemporary worship service.
- ⊙ I lead circles in the corporate world. I always bring a candle, and we begin with silence. Afterwards, people always say, "Could we have this more often?" They really hunger for those moments of quiet.
- ⊙ I lead women's spirituality circles. They've been very successful and I am planning to do more. I also want to start a bereavement circle soon.
- ⊙ I co-lead a circle for corporate executives. I love seeing one woman at a time come into her wholeness. It's a joy to offer this work and a gift to be a part of it.
- ⊙ I have taken Circlework into my work as a child protection worker. I just led a circle for a women's drug and alcohol recovery program and will be doing that every month. I'm also planning to lead circles for women escaping domestic violence.
- ⊙ I am a physician and have been leading a circle for cancer patients. It's been the most amazing, humbling, awe-inspiring experience.

Taking it to the Middle East

Since 2005, I've been leading circles for Jewish and Palestinian women in the Middle East. Needless to say, the impact of violence, war and trauma on these women is immense. Sometimes, the grief and despair we are required to hold feels overwhelming. Yet ultimately, there is healing, hope, and an undeniable sense of holiness.

Working in the Middle East opened my eyes to the truly

revolutionary power of connection. I already knew, thanks to my circles in the United States, how essential connection is to our personal sense of well-being and happiness. But in Israel and Palestine, I realized that connection is also the key to improving relationships between entire groups and nations.

Unfortunately, most governmental responses to conflict, be it in the Middle East or elsewhere, are fear-based. As such, they naturally favor disconnection over connection. One of the most horrific results of this approach is the monstrosity of a wall that Israel has erected around the West Bank. The more fear, anger, hatred and mistrust we feel toward others, the more courage it takes to open to connection. It is easier—far easier—to build yet another wall or install yet another military checkpoint than to face the “others” with all the physical and emotional vulnerability this entails. Will they be willing to hear our pain? Will they be able to empathize with us, or forgive us? There are no guarantees. And yet, I believe there is no other path to peace.

In my circles in the Middle East, we essentially do the same thing as in the United States: we connect. We listen deeply to ourselves and others, and we speak honestly and authentically, even when it’s hard. Over and over, I’ve seen how this allows our relationships to transform. We begin to feel compassion and even love for people whom we formerly distrusted, feared or even hated. We begin to recognize peace as a very real possibility, and indeed as the only option that makes any practical sense. The barriers between us dissolve, and our oneness stands revealed, like the full moon emerging from billowing clouds.

Regardless of where a circle is held, the task of bringing down the walls that separate us is always the same. In my circles in the United States, the enmity between Jews and Palestinians is not our focus. Yet here, too, our circles tend to bring us face to face with people whom we might ordinarily not meet. The very young meet the very old. The wealthy meet the poor. White women connect with women of color. One by one, our prejudices crumble and the labels we have slapped on each other dissolve.

Circlework is for Women Who Want . . .

- ⊙ To experience authentic sisterhood with other women;
- ⊙ To engage in spiritual practices that have no religious or ideological baggage;
- ⊙ To be empowered and empower other women;
- ⊙ To hone their skills in maintaining happy, harmonious relationships;
- ⊙ To cultivate qualities such as gentleness, receptivity, compassion, and courage—all keys to maintaining harmonious relationships;
- ⊙ To honor the physical body as a piece of Mother Earth, ancient and wise, vulnerable and sacred, flawed yet deserving of love;
- ⊙ To serve the greater planetary community.

Embodying the Mandala

Personally, I've never viewed the circle as a mere geometric form. From the start, I perceived it as a living field of presence and consciousness, as a friend, an ally and a sacred being. Often, I think of it as an angel who has, since the beginning of time, been showing us how we might live in harmony with all beings. In my eyes, the circle is a great spiritual teacher who can show us how to make our relationships sweet and joyful, how to deal with obstacles, and how to find our way through the fog of our ego into the clear light of love.

In my reverence for circles, I am by no means alone. From the dawning of human history, our ancestors have been fascinated with them and fully aware of their numinous power. Most religious traditions hold the circle sacred as an expression of divine perfection. And

on every continent, all the most ancient examples of human art are circles. In a cave in India, for example, archeologists recently discovered a cupule—a circular hollow carved into rock—estimated to be between 200,000 and 790,000 years old. Clearly, we've been in love with circles for a very long time.

These days, many people see the circle merely as a convenient format for group gatherings. They might praise its egalitarian spirit—everyone sits at equal distance from the center—but that's about as far as it goes. In contrast, Circlework invites us to actually *embody* the mandala.

Mandala is a Sanskrit word usually translated as “sacred circle.” But what exactly does that mean? It's a question we'll return to at a later point. For now, let me just say that a mandala is an expression of wholeness, centeredness, balance and sacredness. In India, there is a saying, “What you meditate upon, that you become.” I believe this is true. By meditating on the circle, we too become more centered, balanced and whole.

Another important point to understand is that the language by which the mandala communicates is known as sacred geometry, and that sacred geometry is an essential aspect of Circlework. Through its skillful use, we constellate the mandala, not only within our circles, but above all within our own consciousness. When we leave the circle, the mandala goes with us as a vortex of healing presence that continues to anchor us in goodness, wholeness and holiness.

Previously I mentioned some of the attributes of the mandala, such as centeredness, balance and sacredness. I think you'll agree that these are qualities worth cultivating in ourselves and our world. But the foremost attribute of the mandala, as well as its greatest gift, is oneness.

We all want to feel at one with ourselves, our loved ones and our world. Yet the sad reality is that in our day and age, our communities are hopelessly fractured and fragmented. Under these conditions, oneness isn't just a lofty spiritual goal. Rather, it's a key to our survival and arguably our greatest need at this point in time. Unless we can

realize our basic oneness, we have no chance of overcoming global challenges such as climate change.

A circle is, of course, a universal symbol of oneness. A mandala, on the other hand, is no mere symbol. Rather, it's a sacred tool or a medicine. When we're feeling fragmented or separate, it can evoke in us the experience of connection, unity and oneness. Like a bridge, it can lead us from discord to harmony and from isolation to connection. Circlework is a way of consciously and intentionally applying mandala medicine so that we might awaken to our oneness, both as a circle and as a global family.

In our society, most people don't think of the circle as a medicine. Nonetheless our collective consciousness seems to recognize its healing power. Labyrinths are springing up in people's back yards, book stores are carrying stacks of mandala coloring books, and hordes of tourists are flocking to ancient stone circles found around the world. It's surely no coincidence that at a time when we urgently need to realize our oneness as a planetary family, all sorts of mandala-based practices have become immensely popular.

If the stories you're about to read whet your appetite to experience Circlework for yourself, wonderful. But the bottom line is that what works in the circle also works in life. Apply the basic principles of Circlework, and you too will see your world becoming sweeter and more peaceful, your relationships deeper and more fulfilling. Simply reading this book will begin to awaken the mandala within you. And once that inner mandala has been constellated, it will accompany you wherever you go, helping you stay more balanced and centered, peaceful and whole. You'll know the circle then, not only as a magical healing tool, but also as an inner resource that you can call upon at any time.

Learning the Art of Circle Facilitation

This book will introduce you to Circlework as a spiritual practice that is uniting women around the planet, and that can help you too discover

a new sense of wholeness. Interwoven into the fabric of this book are the voices of hundreds of women who have participated in my circles and trainings. Their words will help you better understand the magic that we can work together, but also the challenges we face.

What this book *won't* do is teach you to facilitate circles.

If you're looking for "how to" guidelines, consider purchasing the *Circlework Training Manual*, which covers every aspect of circle leadership. Though originally written for participants of the Circlework Leadership Training, the Manual is also available to the general public. It covers the practical details of how to set up circles and how to deal with the challenges that arise. It includes exercises, meditations, transcripts, frequently asked questions, and much more. Under "Resources," you'll find information on how to order the *Circlework Training Manual*.

Remember, however, that even the best manual can only take you so far. You can read books about swimming till the cows come home, but until you actually get in the water, you'll never learn to swim. In this context, getting in the water means actually participating in circles. Try out different ones. Find out what you like and don't like. Successful circles will help you discover what works. From the less successful ones, you'll learn what doesn't.

Get all the training you can. Initially, circle leadership might seem easy. Yet those who try to facilitate circles without adequate preparation often discover that it isn't as easy as they imagined. The circle is a simple form, but the human psyche is not. I've heard plenty of stories about circles that fell apart or ended in disaster. Many a circle has found an untimely end due to a lack of skilled facilitation.

Of course, there are those who believe that a circle shouldn't have a designated leader at all. Leadership, they say, implies a hierarchy that is incompatible with the egalitarian spirit of the circle.

In my view, this is a misunderstanding. Yes, the circle is a non-hierarchical form; we all sit at equal distance from the center. However, the absence or presence of hierarchy in a circle does not correlate to the

absence or presence of a designated leader. Leaderless circles often develop distinct power structures. Certain individuals take on certain roles, and while there may be no stated hierarchy, it exists nonetheless.

Vice versa, the presence of a leader does not imply that one person has been elevated above others. In Circlework, leadership is merely viewed as a role, never as a mark of personal superiority. Just as an airplane needs a pilot, a circle may benefit from having one or several facilitators. These are, however, no more superior to other members of the circle than pilots are to their passengers.

Each circle is different and unique. The important question, therefore, is: What structure would best serve the needs of this particular circle? Some will do just fine without a leader. Others will benefit immensely from good facilitation. If you want a place where you feel totally safe, there's nothing like working with a trusted, experienced leader. This is especially true when conflict or explosive emotions are at play. For example, the women I work with in the Middle East need skilled leaders who can help them create a safe container for the deep work they are doing.

These days, ministers, counselors and therapists are often expected to lead circles without having received any specialized training. Often, they end up feeling frustrated and stressed. This is not a sign of personal failure. Rather, it highlights our collective state of ignorance in regards to circle facilitation. Even among those well-versed in matters of psychology, spirituality, and personal growth, there's a striking lack of knowledge about how circles function and how to make them safe.

The circle is a powerful tool, and learning to use it well takes time, practice, and dedication. Yet the rewards are tremendous. Granted, I am biased. But as I see it, the circle a tool we urgently need—today, more than ever. Ancient though it is, it is perfectly suited to helping us tackle many of our current challenges, from social isolation to prejudice and racism.

So allow me now to introduce you to my beloved friend, teacher and ally: The circle.