

Way of Council – A very people experience

What do you do when you feel you haven't been heard, or that you won't be heard? That your purposes, intentions and ways of being aren't acknowledged appreciated or understood? Do you have the thought that there is no way you could possibly say what you really think for fear of the consequences? If you do you would hardly be alone, but imagine, a space where these things are addressed safely and simply without any jargon or 'techniques'?

For thousands of years people have been meeting, working with these challenges and thus contributing to community, in circle. The Native Americans developed something called Way of Council, a simple sharing of what is present, what is real and what is personal. Personal in that it comes from the person; how they feel, react and experience the subject in hand, sometimes using stories from their own lives as illustration, expressing the feeling that accompanies, making transparent the process taking place within them. Transparency is the key here. Way of Council is not a therapy, nor entertainment, but a sharing of viewpoint that is contributing to the reality of the present moment in as honest and real a way that feels comfortable.

So here I am facing a circle, ready for whatever comes. Who are these people? What do they need? What will they say? I had asked for a commitment. That everyone would come every day, despite what came, no matter how difficult it seemed, and not shy away. I invite in awareness, and the sounds of the mind, the body and the world, gradually. It had been a beloved friend and regular participant in council who had connected me to a mutual acquaintance, Annie, currently resident in a Devon community with a permaculture focus called Landmatters. She told me they were experiencing a few problems with the people-care, and were in need of a process to help clear a backlog of unexpressed difficulties between them. It was arranged that I would do a week of council in the New Year, and when the energies of the community were focused toward new beginnings. It turned out to be the first week in February, the coldest, severest week of winter for 18 years. Bright sun, rain, snow, sleet and fog. It even thundered whilst it snowed, something I have never experienced before. A few miles away on the A38, 200 motorists were rescued overnight from a freezing motorway jam...

We begin with the simplest round. Any first spontaneous word that comes into the head. "Rhubarb." "Custard?" "?" "Swamp!" "Insect." "Er...er...um... Sorry. Can't think of anything". We go three rounds and I get a snapshot of the vibe of the moment. I give the simple but all important four intentions, guides which hold the space together and to which all are invited to agree; speaking from the heart, listening from the heart, succinctness and spontaneity. In order to support the intentions, a talking piece is employed. This can be a stick, stone, feather or indeed any object which lends itself to be held by the speaker and at best has some significance to the group or situation. With this in hand, no one is entitled to interrupt or indeed speak until the piece arrives in their own hand. This isn't a conversation, but a respectful witnessing and sharing that amongst the many, many gifts of council, minimises reactive behavior. I ask for confidentiality, the fifth intention required outside of the circle. The things one hears are sometimes quite profound, revelatory. They can also be irreverent, simple, plain, funny, fearful and banal, but to the person speaking, it could be the most sensitive or precious thing to expose. This is life, this is human, and the organism today has 20 ears and one mouth.

I read the group's ideal quality of life statements, the considered aspirations of the community for a fulfilling life, but with which they had been struggling with too much work and too few people to get anywhere near achieving. It worked well. The first person picked up the talking piece. "I felt anger and sadness when you read them..." By the 3rd day I felt they were more or less up to speak up about the darker issues some of them were holding toward each other. When challenged by another's behaviour and trying to make sense of it without hearing the other's side of the story, the mind can wander around like a vandal creating all sorts of unhelpful scenarios, engendering resentments and the like which comes from that very human need to know. Why didn't you come to the meeting? Why didn't you help me the other day when you could see I needed help? Why do you always seem to say no to my ideas? Why didn't you tell me that you don't agree? It doesn't get easier the more there are people living, working and creating together. Wise to these tendencies, native communities created the "Way" of the circle.

I laid down the gauntlet after the check-in round by inviting a volunteer to start the process. Silence. I could feel the fear, the sensitivity, the struggle, for the body talks even if the voice does not. I didn't push it, but switched the form to a spiral, rather than a circle. Eventually someone came into the centre to begin, speaking more generally about problems encountered on site and related personal difficulties, which sparked a flowing motion for others to come into the centre, triggered by former speakers and the general theme. It had the effect of airing gradually, the issues at large. I had been prepared for things to get explosive, but the collective wisdom of the group was choosing a gentler, more gradual approach.

On the morning of the 6th and final council, I contemplated taking a risk. This was the time to hand it over, were they ready? We did a couple of rounds, checking in and having a bit of fun pulling an imaginary something out of a bag and surprising ourselves with what it was, then I asked for feedback on the week and whether they wanted to take "Council" on. They did. It seemed pretty clear the benefits were beginning to be felt. I took the risk. I divided the nine participants into three councils of three. By chance, the first council consisted of two women who had an issue. The second group meditated for some time as to what to speak of. I had asked that each council find a "focaliser", or leader, then find a theme. The last group consisted of the three men. They had one hour.

I sat in the middle tuning in with each council... not needed. The hour passed, the atmosphere deepened. Eventually we reconvened as a circle and I asked for feedback. The first person shared her awareness that something very ancient and connective unfolded within her, allowing her to be calm and present. This is what cannot be taught, this is what Council is about. She listened, she heard. The next woman spoke. She had found herself the space holder for the two others to share their differing viewpoints. At first she could feel her stuff, being drawn into the emotions, but she realised that and pulled back. She found that she could take on the role of neutrality and found a peace there, a beingness that enabled her to oversee and hold the space equably. Her face seemed bright with freshness and realisation. The third woman shared that they had taken almost half-hour each to say what they had needed to say. And in her, that time simply being heard, witnessed and uninterrupted, had eased the situation immeasurably. Synchronicity continued to the end, no less in quiet intensity and with further quite remarkable revelations that shall remain confidential.

I felt then as I have for now for seven years, that what council offers in power and simplicity is a practice of being real, of being present. Council engenders stillness, and only from a place of stillness, true listening can come. The deeper we listen, the more profoundly simple the truth.

Testimonial from a member of the group

Living and working together in a small community, there are inevitably areas of disagreement and conflict which arise. Due to lack of time, and possibly lack of courage, we had been largely ignoring these. Consequently they were festering under the surface creating tensions within the group and undoubtedly meaning that we were less effective and most of us unhappy or dissatisfied to some degree.

For me it was such a relief to hear people speak their truths around issues, situations and even their feelings towards others in the group. Somehow simply the naming of things - within a heartfelt space - allowed movement and transformation. At times we found that acknowledging the feelings and emotion enabled the charge to dissipate and we were left with simply a situation to be dealt with, rather than one in which people's identities and sense of wellbeing were entangled. It was my sense that this could potentially happen more as we go deeper with Council.

Rob lives in East Sussex in the UK. He has practiced the disciplines of yoga and meditation for over twenty years, lectured on reality, and teaches a 9-day self-development training known as the Avatar Course.

His training in Way Of Council began in 2002 at the Pilion centre in Greece for alternative workshops and holidays run with an emphasis on community practices, and a daily meeting in council.

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