



Left palm open, right palm down

by **Miriam Hechtman**

To speak uninterrupted is both shocking and liberating. I remember my first time speaking in the circle, conch in hand, seven pairs of eyes rested on me, the sound of silence rising in volume until my own words filled the empty space. I remember glancing down at my slightly wavering hands, feeling time move at a faster pace, every second, a minute.

If you had told me in my early twenties that I would one day be part of a group of women who met monthly, shared their most intimate thoughts freely and only spoke when they were holding the 'talking stick', I probably would have cringed. The notion of such gatherings used to set my alarm bells ringing. People unburdening, sharing, revealing, recalling their past, speaking without hesitation or punctuation – the thought alone made me want to curl up and escape into some hard-covered fiction. The notion of a conch, too, conjured up

images from Lord of the Flies and all my fears around repressed anarchy and chaos brooding under the radar came to mind. Yet, the greater and more frightening thought of course, was that I, too, would have to share, unburden, reveal and speak visibly to a group of women about myself.

I have been meeting with the same seven women for over four years. We didn't have to tick off any boxes to join – background, age, sexual preference, religion, profession or hair colour were never questioned at the gate. We meet every fourth Thursday. Sometimes we don't all make it. Sometimes I would rather stay home. Sometimes I choose not to speak. Sometimes we are all there. This week we will be three. No matter what, when, how, why, there is an unspoken commitment and a trust that I have not experienced with women in my everyday world. In a contemporary culture void of much ritual, having a monthly constancy to meet with these women has deeply enriched my life.

Like a good session with a professional therapist, confidentiality is the first commandment and one

that is taken very seriously. What is said in the circle remains in the circle and this rule along with the talking stick have been the foundations of what makes this space work. When you hold the talking stick, only you can speak. There is no interruption when a woman has her time to share. After this, the circle is your self enquiry playground, and unlike therapy, there is no fee.

As women, often our innate inclination is to help each other, solve each other's problems (especially when we can't solve our own) advise one another and create a dialogue that encourages a shared experience. Empathy makes us feel human, makes us feel like we are not alone in an often precarious world. I have now learned the underrated but most valued skill of listening without interrupting. To listen and stay silent, to eclipse the need to counsel, feels at times unnatural and detached. What I have learned, however, is how much can happen in that moment of silence for both the listener and the speaker. Empathy does not need to be shared through feedback and common stories; compassion can be translated through the pure act of listening. It is also a relief to not have all the answers, to not feel responsible for someone's pain, to not feel the need to put everything in a box and label it. And to speak uninterrupted is so freeing. To speak at my own pace; to not think about my words or others' reactions. To ponder... to pause. This is something I have not experienced anywhere else.

Listening to each woman speak is like holding up a mirror and passing it round the circle. It can be painful to see yourself in others' narratives. Issues that you may not have even uttered, that lie in the basement of your heart and mind and may not have even ripened to consciousness, are revealed in the story of another woman. At first this declaration is confronting, but slowly as you begin to accept this in her, you may contemplate acceptance in yourself.

And it's not that I don't experience intimacy with my female friends outside the group. I have numerous close relationships with other women. I cherish these women like sisters. We chat, we go out socially, we drink occasionally, we laugh, we cry and we discuss a kaleidoscope of topics, many that don't often make it into the women's circle. But something happens when I sit down in the circle that is difficult to recreate outside. Somehow I am transported to the red tent, to a place as ancient as all the women who have lived before me. Daily life dissolves into the light of the flickering candle and I am just me again.

Life's cycles have been played out before me in a way that I had not been privy to before. We have collectively shared the death of a parent, the birth of a child, the joy of a new relationship and the devastation when one fails. Ageing parents, existential fears, disease, career triumphs, everything has been thrown into the cauldron and we women have witnessed it without judgement and without the need to comment. The masks have been removed and there is no going back. Once you have seen a woman in all her splendour, her pain, her scream, then the absurdity of petty jealousy and competitiveness falls at the wayside. What is envy in one woman can be honoured by another. There is nothing to be gained in this sacred circle, nothing to be won, just an opportunity to speak truthfully.

Left palm open, right palm down, the circle is closed. I plan to grow old with these women.



Miriam Hechtman is a freelance writer, researcher and producer. She has covered diverse topics including workplace health, ethical investment, climate change, business and travel. An avid traveller, she has spent much time abroad on trains, planes and buses, meeting fascinating people with extraordinary stories.

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