

**People often ask...as I was again most recently...  
Where did the practice of council come from?  
And what about cultural appropriation?**

Here are some reflections this question has inspired ...I hope it inspires you to share yours.  
Write about your memories, your calling, your way to circle, to council practice as part of  
finding and sharing a way, our way, your way.

Though I have responded to this many times orally and written a bit about it on [waysofcouncil.net](http://waysofcouncil.net), it is good to speak or write to again. Some want a one-liner and resist the complexity of co-arising. I have always appreciated First Nation peoples who take a paragraph at least to introduce themselves...Where do we come from? Who and what do we source when sharing a song...the water that inspired if not gave it to us? I refuse a soundbite answer to this question. So best put on your heartfelt listening ears for I have but my story to tell, just a tiny part of a much bigger, longer story, one small chapter from a 70 year-old white woman of Irish-German descent, a migratory species living now in Big Pine, California, steward of Three Creeks, stolen Paiute land in Paya huunadu, Place Where the Water Flows.



**Council that I know and cherish did not grow out of one lineage or one teacher or indigenous leader, one tribe or one nation. It is a way of life...a world view...a rooted awareness I imagine within all earth-connected traditions and peoples.**

What grew out of life at the Ojai Foundation was a **practice**...to be able to embrace many, if not all of the different lineages, teachers, and students that came...it was and is a way of listening and learning, respecting every voice and discovering wisdom through the gifts of many. It was and is way to slow things to a pace where the words that come thru are rarely remembered because they are not prepared or edited...it is place to trust what is at the heart of any matter.

**For me, it became a practice, a way of learning how to listen and speak with the heart, because of a cultural education so needed, not cultural appropriation.** Whether in our own backyards or across the ocean in another culture and place, I searched from an early age for truthful communication. After living through what seemed the darkest of times, I dedicated myself to learning and living, heart to heart to heart exchanges with whomever I met, whomever I did not know, understand, or agree with. I began meeting simple circle ways in the land of my ancestors, in different countries and places. And then, no mistake, I learned as late as 1980 this way of living, listening, healing and governing was the backbone of many First Nation peoples in the land to which my ancestors had immigrated to find home.

Why had the colonists, why had my ancestors as settlers done everything it seemed they could to bury something so precious, so longed for, so familiar? As many of us now have slowly learned or remembered, sitting in council elicited truth, gave strength, connected one not only to others but to all of life, to earth, to the sun, moon, stars and beyond...to spirit, God, mystery, the unknown. Why was this way of the circle so threatening to the new arrivals? Fortunately, many people today are learning of and sharing the struggle and history that followed, seeing that colonizers' new ways weren't based on discovering land and braving wilderness to create a free society as much as conquering a land and its people's deepest ways of connecting to it.

And yet, throughout this time of colonization, the circle ways survived, and now I dare say thrive. Not as an answer, as much as a medicine for many. What many of us discovered was that we needed a practice perhaps as part of remembering, what some might say today, as part of decolonizing our hearts and minds, our way of listening and talking and being and thinking. And so, we began again and continue today in what has been a natural way to be with others, to know and re-learn what at least some of our ancestors had been doing forever. The more that could join and remember how to do this together the better chance we would have to co-create a world worth living in and for. It was a group of Pacific Island women elders that encouraged me and thanked me for working with my own people, and not trying to come and help them. Modern western people had much to remember about listening, respecting, learning in a circle ....



**Where and when did that circle idea emerge?**

Many of us have easily and naturally felt drawn to sit in circles since childhood; for me, kindergarten in school would not have been remembered without a morning circle holding hands or a show-and-tell, without passing something special around, usually a gift from nature, for all to see and hold...one person at a time...a revolutionary act amongst five year-olds.

If it wasn't then in our earliest experiences and memories, many of us immigrants, westerners, migratory species and settlers found ourselves circling up during the anti-war movement in order to hear each other and strengthen ourselves to brave the front lines. If not there, then many of us were called into the civil rights movement. We joined in circles at times with song, prayer and action for a justice that we knew we had to show up for, despite, if not because, we were entangled in the history of colonialism. I will forever respect the many African-American students and leaders who inspired me with their truth and love and the many who still do today. Then there was the women's movement, which seemed a real chance to change the system and demand wholeness. To see, feel and hold each other in circle was empowering, healing, essential. And yet that circle was not whole despite the best of aspirations, as "for the larger cause", the voices and demands of too many women of color were marginalized.



Dromberg Stone Circle, Ireland

Most of us somehow knew circle was in the stones and in our bones, beyond and before patriarchy. It was and is in the roots of our ancestors amongst the stone circles of Wales, Ireland and England, around the fires and burial mounds across Europe and in the art and spiritual mandalas of Asia. Some only discovered circle ways when things seemed to fall apart – they created circle, or ran to the wild, searched for community, if not family-circle, group therapy sessions that emerged in the 60's. Meanwhile, Rainbow Gatherings attracted the so-called fringe, the hippies, the "wannabes" who knew they needed a different way than top-down, who knew they needed something different than what had been handed them by the dominant white male culture. They sat in circles, imbibed plant medicines, and picked up a talking stick to pass around for good reasons. Many saw that they had much to learn from Eastern gurus and indigenous peoples here and as far off as the Amazon, seeking to heal their disconnection from God, the natural world, and all beings. They entered into most any ceremony outside of what the churches then offered. Some romanticized Native Americans, some ignored them, and too few came to recognize what their lives were truly like and who the people whose lands we had stolen were and had become.



Once we started to look around, circles were everywhere, from tribal people and lands in Africa, to Quakers in New England; talking staffs appeared in the Greek Iliad, at the podiums and in the rituals of Jews, Christians, Buddhists and Muslims alike. That staff meant many things, including that we had the word to be heard. To introduce such in a circle was and is revolutionary...no longer was it the priest alone, the king or the facilitator...when it's your turn- we give attention to your voice, the voice of the child or the elder; the scry of a crow or a siren passing by ...only then is there the opportunity for the circle's voice to be heard and therein, the third, God, spirit, the divine may just come thru.... A moment of wholeness might be touched.

Like most everything, we can stumble into what we need, use something without knowing its history, without even knowing its source or intention, even those of us with the best of intentions. With so many native people on reservations forbidden to carry out their circle ways, their dances and their ceremonies, no wonder some bitterness and resentment emerged on Turtle Island. Land stolen, customs stolen, ceremonies stolen or used without awareness at best. And at the same time, I have experienced an enduring love and kindness, a welcoming despite our history - more often than not. Simultaneously, as some native people moved in between worlds, much was freely taught, exchanged and given. We were told early on by one elder, if we don't give away the gifts we received, we would become ill.



Circle with Beyond Boundaries and Karembu/ITP/aids orphanage, Kenya

And so, many received the stories, the love, the medicines, the rituals and teachings – and too, many then shared them freely. As more westerners picked up and joined in, some kinds of cultural appropriation were bound to occur. In the USA, western law had actually outlawed circle at one time, sent native children off to boarding schools to be forced into western ways, and there emerged almost simultaneously whites walking on red roads. That is a hard story to know, if not be part of and complicit in, and a lot harder of course, if you were one of those children. While many non-natives were invited deeply into ceremonies, apprenticeships and families, others wandered through like tourists. Some, hungry for power, picked up whatever they wanted. Others made up their stories of connection and lineage. There were few gatekeepers, few guardians, few able to stand up to and with what was unfolding. AIM tried, for one, and their resistance and anger was often met simply with more resistance and anger. Perhaps spirit was and is still watching over it all and asking for truth, for reparation, for forgiveness, for education, for love to be a guiding voice towards restoring relations today. As one Lakota grandmother I remember said, surprising many, as well as a young man attempting to make amends ... “it is your land now, share it, love it and learn with it.” There is no quick fix nor any one way to heal the past.



Teaching Tree at The Ojai Foundation

In the meantime, at the Ojai Foundation, Joan Halifax’s vision was to be part of the healing, the learning of the ancient ways and the exploration of modern ways – all focused on peaceful culture. Could indigenous voices be centered in a respectful way without commercializing or commodifying? Could teachings be shared and passed on with guidance, mentorship, and permission? Could peoples from different continents, disciplines, and wisdom traditions discover each other, and through listening to each other, find some common ground? It was in this environment that the simple practice of council grew.

Joan invited people in, and circle created the warmest and most inclusive sense of home – sacred space at last. The best of her inherited Southern hospitality mixed with an innate gene for justice, set the tone of early gatherings at the Foundation. Yet, in everyday community life, her patience grew thin with many of us barely able to articulate who we were much less our needs, and it seemed no mistake she moved on to become a great teacher of compassion. Jack

on the other hand, could stay with what was unfolding in council at most any pace imaginable and we both became devoted to the outcome. Most every indigenous teacher who came drew us into a circle at one time or other and encouraged that way of thinking, meeting, seeing and living. A few of us became devotees you might say and took the practice on for life, more in some ways than even some those of who came and went. We might say, we had the privilege to do such and we wanted to use it well. That meant giving back to those who came as well as paying it forward. Council came close to being a religion without the gurus, a worldview restored for sure, a practice not a career, a way of life focused on relationship. I still question today people charging anything for such, rather than exchanging gifts and simply supporting any costs incurred.



Today's Stone Circle at The Ojai Foundation

Many teachers from different tribes, continents, backgrounds and perspectives showed up and were invited to Ojai over many years. Some were holding as best they could to their traditions despite the history and trauma of genocide. Some were Metis, people with mixed blood, who felt it essential to teach whites if we as a human race of people were to survive. There was racism all around, and such teachers often were controversial amongst traditional people. Some were and are called charlatans by others today, and for sure, some were, and still, many of these relationships, stories and teachings were invaluable.

Everyone then and now had to find their way. I have found that people who listened then and took up direct relations with the earth are most often the ones respectful of the indigenous and the earth today. Even within one tribe as with any nation, some had differences regarding how and what they were taught, thought and shared. Joan and some of us in support felt the circle was the best way to embrace any differences and bring us all together time and time again. A neuro-scientist would sit with a Tibetan monk with an aboriginal elder. This was often far from comfortable, at first. And for some, it was a fulfillment of prophecy and for others most often the best transmission of what was possible.



Thich Nhat Hanh, Grace Spotted Eagle and Wallace Black Elk at the Ojai Foundation

As days, months and years passed, the community, mostly a volunteer staff living in tents, proclaiming nature and the land to be the true teacher, were overwhelmed by the gifts of heart and wisdom as well as the stories of suffering and injustice. Flooded, as well, with many teachers saying their way was the way ...some egos tended to rule. Many people, of almost any background, would use the talking staff in circle as a license to take and receive all of the attention whether elder or guest. Watching the dynamics and often being told we must make what we learned our own, we frequently suggested guidelines and asked all to check in, before jumping in, to what would serve the vision of a more peaceful culture. We shared circle way or what simply came to be called council, with all who came and took our inquiry quite seriously, as the mainstream way of living was no longer an option for most. Living close to the land, asking nature and the circle for guidance became a way for many who continued through long cold winters, hot, hot summers, wild dysfunctional upsets and bumpy life up close with others we barely knew. More and more guests who came to the land to meet a teacher, a monk, a shaman, returned again and again to simply take refuge.

Jack Z. started sharing council ways with children and teachers, families and couples. I continued with communities, with women, and with internationals where I was working; I sat in circles in rite-of-passage ceremonies at the School of Lost Borders and went when invited to indigenous-led gatherings. Leon, often known for his frustration with community circles, turned out to be one of the first trainers and initial sparks for a center for council training; Joe P. and others by now were sitting in many men's circles; Marlow arrived with his theater in the round community experience and Lola guided always with the heart. Jack and I particularly bonded around the need for A PRACTICE, for guidelines, around the need for different forms, and essential respect for listening with the heart beyond the words alone. We focused on authenticity, the gift that each one brings to the circle. The magic that arises after everyone has shared. We acknowledged the need to slow down for most, to give attention to the "place" that was affecting what was happening as well as the people. As people gradually found their true heartfelt voices and learned the power of listening, we slowly recognized a "practice" was growing. The children helped us simplify some guidelines, the teachers and community all contributed, along with nature teaching life on the land.



To name one root would be an injustice, if not a lie, as this practice of council with its emerging forms grew literally out of the circle – sitting every week over many years if not lifetimes, with different cultures, different ages, genders and species. Asking what would serve .....

We always have and always will acknowledge and support indigenous peoples; I myself could name at least 20 significant peoples..As well, I must acknowledge the Jesuits despite some of their more well- known history...who I sat in circle mass with when I was 12; and then there were some Sacred Heart nuns who were my first mentors in activism, the bible stories that led me to the desert curious what Jesus was doing fasting there. I feel it inaccurate at best trying to name something that cannot be named, to give any claim to any one person as the lineage holder of council practice or council ways.

### **Council itself is the root of the practice ...**

Maybe that is hard to grok or even say, as many still live in a world of single heroic myths, individuality in the West, of wanting one teacher or one root, whereas the very nature of all the forms we offer – spiral, response council, the web, the fishbowl, sound and movement, council in nature, couples with a third – all grew out of sitting, time and time again, with different teachers, leaders, guests, staff, and children and discovering, asking in the moment, what might serve. We found a way, and then practiced it over and over again until we knew its gift. Said most simply, it emerged through a world view that life is a circle as with the seasons in nature - a true awareness, available to any and all.



Walking Water Pilgrimage 2015 thru 2017

Circles are natural and one way of honoring all voices, all of life and recognizing anyone can be the leader at any time or have the wisdom. That is how the practice we offer today came to be such; it was informed through experience, through dedicating ourselves to that as a way – to thinking and living as a circle and seeing life through that lens.

What we found is that many modern people lacked listening capacity and so for years to bring attention to this, what some name a talking stick or staff, I came to call “a listening piece.” What also became clear was that marginalized voices best be heard for as long as needed. In modern Western white worlds that was rarely the case or space. Therefore, sometimes we sat much of an hour if not a day, listening to a youth, or a native elder, which was pretty new for a modern scientist to do. The listening became part of the healing needed by both, if not all parties, and still continues today. Some need to learn just to do that, especially for and with someone who has never shared or been heard before ...

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Councils have different intentions and uses of course and that is always important to clarify. The bottom line for most, I would say, is to be part of the healing needed in our world and part of the opening to guidance, and to power that simply comes through - beyond personalities and individual egos. A practice such as listening for what serves me to share, others to hear and the greater story and mystery helped and still helps me and many, move from an individual egocentric focus to a WE...gradually people came and come to experience the wisdom of a circle and don't have to be the ones with all the knowledge. Our interdependence is a gift that can be and needs to be directly experienced. This was true amongst teachers, leaders and participants, and thank god, continues to be experienced by many today. Reading about it is one thing, living it is another.

If I were to name my lineage, I would begin with saying nature-as-teacher, the situations as a seeker I found myself in, the community I met and longed for, the ceremonies I was offered and discovered within, the practices I was given, the experiences we shared. I would honor my

ancestors, the lands and waters, the animals and plants and what some call the spirit world that guided me. I would name especially the dolphins that inspired me and saved my life with their love and trust. As for the human teachers in those days when we grew council practice and council grew us, I might with love and gratitude, include some of those I still remember now—

Chumash Grandfather Semu, Lakota Elders Wallace Black Elk and Grace Spotted Eagle, Joe David Nuu-chah-nulth artist, Dagara Papa Elie Hien, Hopi traditional leader Thomas Banyacya, Don Jose Matsua, Huichol Shaman, Aboriginal elder Gubuu Ted Thomas, Lacandon elder Chan kin Vieho, Metis Hyemeyohsts Storm, African-American Luisa Teisch, Benedictine monk Father Bede Griffith, Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Han, Zen Buddhist Roshi Bernie Glassman, Korean Zen master Soen Sa Nim, Tibetan Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, Lama Tsultrim Allione,

along with historians, activists, artists, authors, scientists and visionaries such as

Joseph Campbell, Huston Smith, Tony and John Lilly, Terrance Mckenna, Francisco Varela, Rupert Sheldrake, Brian Swimme, Joanna Macy, Gabrielle Roth, Meredith Little, Steven Foster, and of course, Roshi Joan Halifax, and all that came in search of that more beautiful, just, whole and healthy world (“our hearts know is possible,” says Charles Eisenstein).... for starters.

And the kids, the ones who wandered in and out, the ones we meet in everyday life  
Some whom we spent a day with, some weeks with, some whom we still know today ....

People often ask when or where was the first time you sat in council? Jack usually says with Elizabeth Coghurn...I say Indonesia where a prayer was made, an incense lit and a microphone placed in the center of a large circle for anyone wanting to express gratitude ...poems and songs and words tumbled through a blessed evening with 65 Indonesians and four of us white management trainers...that was another one of those times, when I knew we had a lot to learn.

As for the word council itself - I am not sure who first used it when and where. If dictionaries are checked, we find:

**“Council comes from the Latin word concilium for "group of people, meeting," which is what it basically means today. “**

In all of the councils I have sat with different indigenous people, people of color or people of culture as Tiokisin would say, as well as white western, no objection has ever been raised. For any who feel there has been abuse or misuse rather than respect and education, I imagine like anything, it depends how we speak, how it is carried, not just a word we use. Participating in this continuing time and work of decolonization, I am open to learn, change and apologize for my mistakes, misses or lack of awareness. My only hope is if any need to change words, for whatever reason, for wherever they are or whoever they are with, that we continue to learn how “to meet” in such ways...with love.

My first sacred circle I would say was at birth and then at a death. Where was yours?



The practice of council was and is many things to many people. In closing, I wish to add my voice and bear witness to a pathway - to one way to sit and open to greater awareness of the universe in which we live. It was and is, for those called to widen the circle of their lives beyond what they have been told, taught, or given by their parents, their class, their genders, background or often culture. It was and is an opportunity to begin with who we think we are, stand for who we know we are and go beyond boundaries of who we have been. It is a becoming for all that choose anew to meet themselves and each other and the wholeness of the circle of life.



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