

## **THE UNSPOKEN DREAM**

MARSHA FOREST AND JUDITH SNOW

Circles begin with a simple dream.

A person who is hurting says..

*"I want to be included in ordinary life."*

*"I want my child to be happy and to have friends."*

*"I want a home, a family, a decent job."*

*"I don't want to die. I want some peace and quiet in my life."*

Simple statements, but profound. That is how circles begin.

We believe that most human problems can be improved, some solved by beginning a circle. But without a circle, none of the above can happen.

"To dream alone is simply a dream" so the saying goes, but to "dream together is the beginning of a new reality".

Judith Snow ended up in a nursing home in Toronto because she thought of herself as a disabled woman, a failure, a source of pain and anguish to all those around her. She was carefully taught to believe this from early childhood, not so much in words, but in the actions of the world she lived in.

### **Judith speaks:**

*"For ten years I tried to find solutions to my "attendant care problem". My solutions were part of the problem. I needed incredible income to get what I wanted. I would have had to be a veritable millionaire to afford private attendant care on a 24 hour basis.*

*I thought I had to go where the services would be.  
I never thought the services should or would or  
could come to me.*

*I even helped create these places where people like  
me could go for attendant care. The problem was  
these places said I was too handicapped even  
though I had helped create them. It was like one  
weird joke and the joke was on me.*

*When I met Marsha Forest she kept saying how  
awful and disgusting it was for me to have to live  
like I was living. in an institution. She didn't offer  
advice or solutions but she just uttered what I had  
been thinking. for so long. She had read my  
unspoken dream. She had heard my  
unspoken cry for freedom.*

*I was dying in the chronic care nursing home, but  
that was what I was supposed to do --die. The  
doctors and nurses were drugging me to death  
rather than dealing with my needs."*

### **Judith leaves the institution**

*But Marsha kept hearing my unspoken scream and  
this allowed me to take the first step -- I decided to  
die outside the institution rather than inside it. I  
was still not ready for living,,but at least the dying  
part was improving daily.*

*I moved out and lived for awhile in the hallway of a  
friend's apartment . I kept on working -- until my  
new apartment with built in attendant care was  
ready. I had wished for and had finally been  
promised the apartment with attendant care. After  
waiting for six months I was told NO once again .  
They said that I was too handicapped and needed  
too much care for this new apartment complex.*

*I collapsed!*

*Meanwhile , Marsha had introduced me to many new people who saw what I was good at. She never introduced me as "my favorite handicapped person." I was always "Judith who can help you solve this or that problem", or "Judith, my incredible friend who is a brilliant teacher," or, "Judith this incredible woman I work with".. This was all new to me. At first, I was truly convinced that Marsha was a witch.*

*When I collapsed I stopped talking. This really destroyed Marsha who needed me - especially talking and especially talking to her. Peter Dill and Marsha got me to her house. Jack Pearpoint arrived and together they called 14 people into Marsha and Jack's living room for the FIRST CIRCLE.*

*They had not read any "circle technique" texts and they didn't even know they were "calling a circle" - - they just were desperate and knew they needed the help of many people to get them and me out of this crisis.*

*I was in the meantime upstairs (Jack and Peter carried me up to the bedroom I where stayed for over a week). Shaunee, an incredibly loving yellow labrador retriever stayed by my side and licked my wounded spirit with her total and unconditional love while the rest of the gang met downstairs to solve the crisis (me) in the upstairs bedroom.*

*Peter Dill and Shaunee sat with me and I soaked in all this love without a word.*

*Marsha asked people NOT to "how can we help and fix Judith." but rather, "how can we get Judith backto work as soon as possible because we need and love her."*

*I was upstairs being totally angry at the world and at myself. I didn't want to participate. They kept sending people and food upstairs including real*

*Jewish chicken soup . I had to recover or become very fat and used to this queen like existence.*

*My friends slowly got me to participate in my own fate . I had lost my will to live and to fight . Slowly with each drop of homemade chicken soupe and warm hand holding, I regained my spirit -- to live and to fight the system that was making me and many others crazy and sick..*

## A GOOD CIRCLE

We learned a great deal about how to make a circle work. We had to. Judith's life depended on it.

We learned that a good Circle:

- listens
- has ideas about everyones participation
- has a political component - fighting against injustice

In contrast, a weak Circle:

- does not listen to the real needs of the person
- is often pseudo political or non-political
- is too friendship oriented without political action
- is afraid of conflict and struggle
- is too nice

Many circles emerge in crisis. Often people in crisis ask for what they think they can get, not what they really want. It is important to ask over and over again. **WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT?**

When a person is in crisis, often they will through their tears or silence tell you the real dream. Someone who is in deep communication with the person and feels the kind of empathy Marsha and Judith shared, will be able to articulate the dream.

Judith can do the same for Marsha. When Marsha is in pain or anguish Judith can often articulate Marsha's dream. Dream sharing is a reciprocal process. If its one way, its too "social worky."

When we can articulate what we really want, people are drawn to us. People hate being lied to - even if the lie is unintentional. Lies send

people away. The truth draws people like a magnet. Even if the truth is painful, it is real.

### MAKING THE CIRCLE HAPPEN

Someone must facilitate -- make the circle happen. A circle doesn't come out of thin air. One key person must invite others in. Most of us in this very private society believe we should "suffer in silence" i.e. suffer alone. Most of us are afraid to ask for help. It is amazing however, that every time a circle forms, people come forward -- if asked.

Many people say they want a circle, but they never ask. Conclusion - they really don't want to solve the problem. The problem may be too comfortable or the change may be too threatening. You can't push a circle on someone. We have learned this because many times, we attempted to start circles for people. The individuals were filled with fear and negativity. They said yes in words and no in deeds. But the number of circles that start and flourish far outweigh those that wither.

You can't push a river, it flows on its own. You can't force a circle -- it grows only in fertile soil.

The Facilitator's role is to expect people to say yes, to be an inviter, to not see the problem as a burden or too impossible to handle. If the facilitator is unsure, scared, etc., the circle will not grow. The facilitator must be bold and courageous, and at times abrasive or brazen in reaching out for help.

Most of our lives are about our relationships and our work. Remarkably, it is hard to say yes to life and to relationships. If there is a problem, we seek the "expert", the human service solution to the problem. It is hard to unlearn this "searching for the pill to solve the problem" approach. It is called the medical model and it is deeply ingrained in all of us.

We have learned through experience that the answer to life's problems, great and small, is in calling people you trust and love together, and listening, and sharing, and slowly but slowly finding the solutions to problems.

If and when professional help is needed, the circle finds the doctors, the therapists, the homeopaths, the vacation.

### **A few examples**

Recently a friend of ours was having a crisis at work that was lasting far too long. He had the courage to reach out to his friends and have mini circles with various groups of people. Everyone gave him the same advice. Take a break, go away -- or end up in the hospital. Everyone listened, but so did our friend. He took the advice and now is on sabbatical at a quiet retreat instead of in the hospital, or worse --dead.

Everyone including our friend could disaster looming. But our friend was wise and courageous. He reached out and circled himself with the men and women he respected.

Too many people were saying the same thing. He was finally forced to listen. Most of all, he listened to his own heart. It was about to break unless it got rest.

With a little help from his friends, including Judith Snow, Marsha Forest, John O'Brien, John McKnight, John O'Leary, Neil Webster, Ethel Gray -- he stopped and renewed his life. Jack's circle comes from all parts of North America and one from Europe. A circle doesn't always have to be in one locale. A circle is a community of interest and can be held through the phone, the fax, or face to face.

Some of Jack's circle flew in, others were local. Many long distance calls were made. The key is that Jack facilitated his own circle with the help of Judith and Marsha. And he listened, and he was listened to.

Too many people inadvertently choose illness instead of health to get out of a crisis. Men especially choose the heart attack/stroke route to avoid facing the truth about themselves and their lives.

There is a marvelous zen statement that we said to Jack over and over during his crisis of the last 18 months

***THE WAY OUT IS THROUGH THE DOOR ...  
WHY IS IT SO FEW PEOPLE USE IT?***

For Jack the way out was either to the hospital or to a quiet retreat in Northern Ontario. He is planning a trip to Southeast Asia where he will regain a much needed perspective on himself, his life and his work. This is another example of the circle at work.

### **More examples:**

When Marsha's mother took critically ill in Florida, she put the circle concept into her own life. She and her mother had always had a turbulantly loving relationship fraught with guilt, and pain, but also love. Having her mother move to Toronto and simultaneously facing a early breast cancer were too much for Marsha to handle.

"Call out the troops before you collapse," she said to herself. "Practice what you preach. Get your friends together and ask for help"..She did, and they came. It was quite overwhelming to actually see all the love from so many channels.

Some helped in to move Marsha's mom, Ida, to a decent place in Toronto, close, but not in Marsha and Jack's home. Others helped Marsha through the breast cancer with positive energy and love. Sari and Doug Biklen were never far away by phone And for local support, Father Pat Mackan, Judith Snow, Victoria Pollock, Tracy Lequyere, John O'Leary and others were always there when needed. Paul Levy gave much welcomed professional counselling services and Drs. Yves Talbot and the venerable surgeon Dr. Irving Koven gave loving and skilled technical assistance.

We do not reject professional help or technology when the power remains in the hands of the person in crisis. I chose to go to the doctors and therapists I went to . I was in control of my life. Actually I was totally out of control for awhile until I was circled and helped to regain my equilibrium. Victoria drove around Toronto with me searching for decent health care facilities for my mother. When Jack couldn't come to Florida, Tracy Lequyere was on the plane with me.

And of course Jack was always there.

But two alone in crisis are never enough. Crisis needs company. Crisis needs friends, and chicken soupe, and other people to make your decisions when you have simply run out of your own steam.

It was Judith's crisis that made us all aware of how to live our own lives. She was the first great circle teacher and she has shared her lessons well, but then again, we were smart enough to listen.

### Long Term Commitment

All of the above stories are long term -- now over ten years old. Circles are communities in microcosm and communities don't grow overnight. Circles grow because of, not in spite of struggle. Smooth circles are hippie-type love-ins. They burn out quickly from boredom and lack of commitment.

It is only the circles with struggle that have lasted--the Helleiners, the Gasters, the Woronkos, -- lasting long term commitment and love, born of struggle.

No two circles look the same as no two snowflakes look the same. Jane (fictional name) called a circle after she was having terrible flashbacks to her childhood recalling physical and sexual abuse involving incest. Shaking, she sat through a circle gathering with six friends who held her and allowed her to sob with them.

Individuals made commitments to her, as simple as walking with her for daily exercise, helping babysit her infant daughter, finding her a competent and caring therapist, and getting her involved in ACA (adult children of alcoholics -- a support group)..

Jane has never called this circle together again, but each person is following through on his/her commitments and Jane is attending ACA meetings and counselling sessions regularly. She is in touch with her support group individually and feels no need to have another gathering at this time.

### Hundreds of Circles are Born

In the Southern Ontario vicinity there are now hundreds of circles. They are all informal and personal. There is no circle building organization. There is no circle building technology. There are just hundreds of people helping one another in small and miraculous ways.



Often we have seen double circles form around families with members who are in crisis. One circle is for the parents; the other for the child or young adult. These circles are often overlapping but different, and often operate simultaneously. Over time, the two circles can and most often do become independent. After all, as young people become adults, how many want their parents as a major part of the decision making in their lives. They may enjoy their parents company, but may not want Mom and Dad interfering in their adult decisions.

Social workers, teachers, doctors etc can be members of circles (and we highly recommend this), but not as professionals -- as part of the circle--as friends. That same person might also be the child or adult's family doctor or teacher, but when in the circle, he/she is there as a member of the team to listen, to hear the dream, and to work on issues as they arise.

## **VULNERABILITY**

Another heart of the circle is the concept of VULNERABILITY. Again the culture teaches us (especially men) to hide their vulnerability and their weakness. *"Big boys don't cry."* In this society, we try so hard to "fix" everything and to "make everything better", that often we just don't see the person who may not be fixable or helpable in that "mechanical" way..

Fixing people with disabilities is an attractive and laudable goal. If Judith could just walk, and if Peter could just talk... If, if, if...When the person or problem cannot be fixed, our aculturation makes it hard for us to deal with. We feel vulnerable, like we've failed. We fear failure and value success, so we reject the person who can't be fixed. They and we have failed to become the perfect person or the perfect fixer.

Nobody can be fixed, but everyone can become truly who he/she is in this world, WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM THEIR FRIENDS. This is very different from the **fix it** model. A person is not a car; mechanics are not needed here. What is needed are human beings in contact with one another, who dare to be vulnerable and real.

## **TAKING OFF OUR MASKS**

*I'm scared.*

*I'm weak.*

*I'm afraid.*

We are all these things, but we wear masks to hide the child within us and thus miss so much of the beauty that dropping the mask reveals. In a society that spends billions on advertisements to convince particularly women and now men too, to keep young, to smell perfect, to remain thin, etc -- it is hard to tell someone you accept her with hairy legs, fat thighs, and an aging wrinkled face.

But that's what it's about -- seeing the real inner beauty that each of us carries. Encouraging people to drop their masks and reveal whatever lies within.

We can change our own lives and the lives of the people we touch by unmasking our true selves and learning to listen to the dreams and wishes of those close to us. Truly helping someone means full acceptance first, and NOT trying to fit someone into a pre-existing system Truly helping people grow never fails to work!

The more vulnerable a person is physically or mentally, the more the circle needs to be regular and long term. Judith's circle is constant for her very life is always in peril. Her daily life is a constant crisis. If she is not to end up in a nursing home, she needs both an inner core circle, and then literally hundreds of others around to keep her life afloat.

### **CIRCLES NEED TIME TO TAKE ROOT**

Circles take time to build Often it takes years for a real circle to take root. The circle becomes in many ways an alternative family system and works in the same way that a healthy family works.

People are all there voluntarily for **the heart of the circle is love**, not money. Again, paid professionals and paid workers may be crucial to the person's life, but they are not the circle. The circle calls upon these people for paid services when needed.

We believe that the idea and practice of a circle is a life saving device for vulnerable people, or for people in short or long term crisis. For the mental and physical health of everyone, circles are one tool among many that we have found useful in our own lives.

The circle is an ancient symbol of unity and love. It is the symbol given in marriage. It is a beautiful and simple way of reaching out to one another and touching the heart of each of our suffering, our anguish and our joy. It is no panacea and no cure. It is simply the circle -- a never ending chain of struggle to live a life of dignity. And if in some small way the circle adds to the health of our planet, and brings a bit of peace in this world, we will feel we have made a small but lasting contribution.