



## Being in Circle

### The Authentic Self and the Witness

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Angeles Arrien\* says that we need to do four things to make our lives work and they apply to being authentic in the circle as well. She says we must show up, pay attention, tell the truth, and not be attached to the outcome.

A circling community allows many opportunities to practice these skills by teaching us to be fully present, to pay attention to our deepest impulses, and to be alert and aware of others. We learn to tell the truth so that we can be deeply know just as we are, while discovering more about ourselves. Our commitment needs to be so great to these principles that we will do them regardless of the outcome. This means that we “give away” from the very best of ourselves.

This state of awareness, contained within a circle, generates an energy that cannot come from any other place. This is what has been called in many traditions “The Witness.” To be an effective witness requires that we pay attention, not project, interpret, judge, or try to “fix” the other. There is not room for interference in another’s process. The witness is asked to sit in his/her own circle of power, pay attention, take responsibility for what he/she is feeling, and not project his/her experience onto the other. The only way to really see someone else is to fully own our emotions, feelings and thoughts.

***The need to be really seen is as great as the need for food and shelter, yet most of us go through life starving for reflection. We all need to be seen with eyes filled with love, acceptance and adoration.*** There is a terrible loneliness and alienation when we feel no one sees, hears or understands us. This loneliness lingers in circles unless the quality of witnessing is present.

Sometimes, as part of witnessing, people go through a stage in which they seem to know what they are feeling, and they take the certainty that affords them and assume they know what others are feeling. This is not witnessing. For instance, sometimes when people feel afraid of another’s pain they will immediately reach out to hug and stroke them, which stops the process, or they

will come up with a solution to the other person's dilemma or discount the other's feeling by saying it's not really so bad. All these are the reaction of someone who is afraid of their own pain, of someone who is not being in circle.

Learning how to witness is essential because we live in a time when great numbers of people are beginning to tell their truths. Some of these truths are hard to hear, some involve terrible childhood abuse and betrayal, yet they must be told and heard. When they are not heard properly the telling is undermined and damage, rather than healing, may result. It can take a long time to regain the courage to tell the story again.

***In the circle process, when people sit and speak from the deepest part of themselves, no matter how wounded, how much anguish, or how many tears, they, at that moment, are sitting in their circle of power. They need to be witnessed, that is, to be respected for their willingness to go so deep and be so vulnerable. What is required of us as witnesses is to sit in our own circle of power, owning our own pain and fear, fully being with those feelings and not projecting them outward.***

***Our stories need to be heard, not fixed.*** Nobody needs fixing: we're not machines. All we need is to be heard. We need someone else to know how hard it was, to know that we have survived with dignity and that we are not afraid to feel. We as human beings need more than anything to be seen, known, felt, accepted and loved.

When other people are real in the circle, we love them for their process of being whole. We love each other for being who we are, with all our perfections and imperfections. The essence of the process is to validate that we are living, breathing, dancing, real people, who feel pain and fear and make mistakes, while loving and caring about each other. The circle form creates a place for everyone to work, pray, be real, and feel at one with each other, all together.

Being in the circle teaches us to respect one another and ourselves. When this happens, we are brought into the experience of immanence and sacredness, making us better able to honor the beauty and the integrity of the earth. If enough people gather in circle and grapple with their identities within this context, it enhances the possibilities of us all. Creative group dynamics is essential if we are going to mobilize healing and create an ecological environment for ourselves.

\***Angeles Arrien** (1940 – 2014) was a Basque-American cultural anthropologist, educator, author, lecturer and consultant, best known for her book *The Four-Fold Way: Walking the Paths of the Warrior, Healer, Teacher and Visionary*.