

## **Age Old Wisdom - The "Circle of Courage." Making Life More Meaningful: a Restorative, Reflective and Interactive Approach - by K. Ashton**

In this fast paced world today we often face the age old dilemma of questioning "what is the meaning of it all?" We do so while grappling to find a sense of purpose faced with the constant bombardment of technological, social and scientific advancements. The following article seeks to introduce a model for enhancing personal meaning and purpose while providing a reflective and interactive opportunity for readers to explore personal histories relating to the drive for purpose. The ultimate goal is the application of the learning to benefit one's larger community.

In my career as an educator and mental health practitioner I was fortunate enough to receive training in reclaiming and restorative practices. One of the philosophies I discovered and utilized for working with people in trauma was the "Circle of Courage." The Circle of Courage is based on indigenous knowledge and heritage. Dr. Martin Brokenleg a Lakota Indian from South Dakota took this cultural and ancestral phenomenon and developed it as a therapeutic model for promoting well-being with diverse populations. In fact in the late 1980's Brokenleg was commissioned to take this model to South Africa and work with Desmond Tutu on the process of integrating the education system post-Apartheid.

The Circle of Courage is commonly known amongst many indigenous tribes in the United States. It serves as a child rearing model which fosters a cooperative "whole community" approach with efforts focused on guiding and providing opportunities for children to develop into self-actualized human beings. The Circle is made up of four main components; 1. Belonging, 2. Independence, 3. Mastery, and 4. Generosity. These components or experiences known as the "well- springs" of life are seen as essential to the healthy development of an individual and the survival of the larger community. The following defines each component:

**1. BELONGING** - Feeling at one with the group, being valued for one's unique and common characteristics, a sense of safety and security that you will be respected and provided for and that you serve an essential role to the survival of a group or community.

**2. INDEPENDENCE** - The ability to do things on your own and take care of yourself while also looking out for others.

**3. MASTERY** - Being good or successful at something, the development of a talent or skill which benefits the tribe or group. Examples could include an expert hunter who can provide for the larger group or a knowledgeable leader who is skilled at listening and helping people solve problems through guidance in a nondirective manner.

**4. GENEROSITY** - The ability to give back or pay forward selflessly. Can be materially, spiritually or psychologically. Big or small, the key is giving regularly from the heart without reservation.

It is important to mention that the above components are viewed as characteristics that are interdependent and are not innate. They must be developed through positive interactions, deliberate mentorships, and by numerous and consistent opportunities fostered by multiple individuals over time.

One can see how elements of the Circle of Courage, with a core value of cooperation at its center conflicts with Western values and child rearing philosophies which are often more competitively oriented. However, the Circle is supported by other psychological schools of thought grounded in humanistic values. Abraham Maslow one of the "founders of the humanistic approach, the school of thought that coincides with the existential branch of psychoanalysis, proposed human beings love, experience moments of transcendence, evolve as individuals and search for meaning. [1]" Aligned with the Circle of Courage, Maslow argues that self-actualization, the goal of fulfillment can only be attained following the satisfaction of various fundamental or "esteem" needs. This is referred to as "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." The hierarchy of needs which stresses that love, recognition, acceptance and safety in childhood influences human capacity to reciprocate love in adulthood relates closely with the Circle of Courage's construct of belonging [2].

There is also an overlap here with Circle of Courage's concept of mastery and what Maslow coined as "peak experiences" which states of contentment and fulfillment are achieved by those who experience purpose and are fully self-actualized [3]. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called this immersive state "flow" or "being in the zone. [4]"

Victor Frankl a Venetian psychologist who also was a Holocaust survivor suggested that "survivors are individuals who choose to distinguish their suffering with meaning on a higher level. [5]" Frankl drew on this sense of meaning as his impetus for survival while incarcerated in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. Frankl's purpose was to survive in order to complete his manuscript containing his psychological theory. In terms of the Circle of Courage this was Frankl's ultimate culmination of his life's work. His crown achievement or mastery as identified within Brokenleg's Circle. Frankl's theory further relates to that of Brokenleg's in that Frankl "was particularly concerned about the effect of discontinuities on the young. Frankl stressed that "without reliable reference points, one has difficulty plotting a life course. [6]" Thus Frankl's theory of "Logotherapy" including reference points coincides with the elements of Brokenleg's Circle, specifically; belonging, independence, mastery and generosity.

In terms of the psychological model, Brokenleg argues the notion that all people of all ages and backgrounds benefit from the four essential self-actualizing catalysts - belonging, independence, mastery and generosity. Furthermore, the lack of one or more of these elements leads to what is coined as the "existential vacuum" (a lack of meaning and purpose along with a sense of isolation many depressed and unhappy people experience). Brokenleg proposes the therapeutic value of fostering and strengthening the missing or deficient element(s) in the treatment and healing of those experiencing the "existential vacuum." Successful intervention leads to a better quality life for both the subject of the treatment and the community at large who benefits through the restored and reclaimed individual's subsequent contributions to the group or clan. The

discovery of meaning is an ongoing process, and every moment of life is potentially meaningful, even, according to Frankl, "up to our last breath. [7]" Thus completing the Circle.

### **Personal Reflection and Application to Life Spans and Spaces:**

Let us now investigate on a more personal in-depth level two of the major components of the Circle of Courage, belonging and generosity. It is my hope that the following reflective writing exercise serves to deepen participants understanding of the Circle of Courage while also serving as a therapeutic tool to restore or strengthen personal meaning subsequently leading to purposeful activism to support those in your life-space community. Furthermore, it is my hope that the life experiences you reflect on are significant to your well-being and bring you peace in knowing that there are people in this world who nurture, guide and help us become who we are meant to be. Ultimately, we all have it in us to become one of those individuals!

### **Focused Reflection - Belonging & Generosity**

Your Personal Epistemology (history, experience) relating to belonging and generosity.

Directions: write about and reflect on how you have experienced belonging and generosity in your life span. How it was fostered in you by others?

**Life period (Childhood)** - write about how others such as parents, siblings, teachers, clergy, mentors, peers etc. fostered your feelings of belonging and how they showed you generosity during your early years.

Answer the following: Who fostered belongingness for you and who showed you generosity during your earliest years?

Reflect in writing: How did they foster it? What did they do?

Reflect: How did these nurturing acts impact you during your childhood and in the long run?

**Life Period (Adulthood before Incarceration)** - reflect on how others such as parents, significant others, spouses, teachers, clergy, mentors, peers etc. fostered your feelings of belonging and how they showed you generosity during your adult years - before Incarceration.

Answer the following: Who fostered belongingness and who showed you generosity during your adult years before Incarceration?

Reflect: How did they foster it? What did they do?

Write: How did these positive acts have an impact on you when you first experienced them (in adulthood) and how have they "stayed with you" (become part of your life narrative)?

**Life Period (Adulthood - Here and Now... Incarceration)** - reflect on how others such as parents, significant others, spouses, teachers, clergy, mentors, peers etc. fostered your feelings of

belonging and how they showed you generosity during your adult years - Incarceration.

Answer the following: Who has fostered belonging and who has shown you generosity during your Incarceration?

Reflect: How did they foster belonging and generosity? What did they do?

Write: How have these acts impacted you?

**CLOSING THE CIRCLE** - Plan for promoting belonging and generosity in your current life-space (here & now).

Things to think about...

Start with asking yourself "What can I do?" When you think of fostering Belonging and displaying Generosity, what types of invitation and giving come to mind first? Now think outside the box - what other resources could you share with others? When you have observed seemingly small actions make a difference for others what does it teach you about the importance of everyday acts of service? When you observe someone in your community is hurting, what do you do? How do you offer them kindness, inclusion and support?

Plan: Formulate your plan to foster belonging and generosity in your life space.

Answer the following:

Who will be the target of your belonging and generosity intervention? (Try to pick an individual in need of belonging and generosity). Could be more than one individual.

How will you make an effort to intervene to promote a sense of belonging and how will you show generosity in a way that may have a genuine positive impact on the individual (s)? What will you do? (Keep in mind multiple methods or actions on numerous occasions may be more effective than one-and-done type efforts. Remember even small acts can make a big difference).

Reflection: What did you do to foster belonging and demonstrate generosity? (daily efforts or activities)

Write: Who were the targets of your efforts?

Write: What specifically did you do? Reflect:

How did your plan go? What was successful? What if anything would you do differently?

Reflect: How did this experience enrich your life and the person (s) you helped?

Reflect: In what ways does your attitude change when you act in service of others?

Write: What do you intend to do to continue the cycle / circle?

### **INSPIRATIONAL QUOTES:**

"Kindness is essential to our survival and well-being. It brings meaning to our lives and makes the lives of others more meaningful. Kindness is the 'emotional coat' we wrap around others to provide human warmth, love and hope." - N. Long

Romans 15:1-2 - "Strength is for service not status."

"It's a sad world. Let us lift it a little." - K. Ashton

### **Notes and References**

1. Frank Tallis, *The Act of Living: What The Great Psychologists Can Teach Us About Finding Fulfillment* (New York: Basic Books, 2020, 45-46.
2. Ibid., 47.
3. Ibid., 178-179.
4. Ibid., 177.
5. Ibid., 251.
6. Ibid., 253.
7. Ibid., 255.

### **EVALUATION: FEEDBACK FOR THE AUTHOR**

What did you like (what was meaningful)?

What did you find useful?

What didn't you like (why was it not helpful)?

What would you add or change?

Overall how would you rate on a scale of 1-10?