

Focusing and The Way of Council

The Way of Council is a form of community listening that helps the wisdom of the whole group to emerge. It facilitates an open, non-judgemental space within which heartfelt feelings can be expressed and knotty issues can be explored.

The form of the Way of Council is simple, so that communities everywhere can benefit. It has been taken into conflict situations, schools and community groups. It was developed and synthesised by Jack Zimmerman, based on his learning of Native American community listening.

There are 4 practical guidelines:

1. Speak from the heart.
2. Listen with the heart.
3. Be lean of expression.
4. Spontaneity.

1. Here we might bring in what we know about Focusing. The heart is also the body, and as we sit with some knotty issue or problem, we can slow down and wait for a felt sense to emerge. As you speak, more might come. And what you say contributes to the 'more' in the whole group.

It is important that you stay with your experience, own it and speak from that place. Generalisations are not helpful. It is better to be specific, in a Focusing way. Take your time to say exactly what you want to mean.

2. Focusers know how to listen, respectfully, with acceptance, a non-judgemental attitude and self-awareness. This increases depth and empathy, so that group members are able to speak freely.

3. Be 'lean of expression' means to not go on for too long, recognising the size of the group and the time available. It is good to have at least two 'rounds', where each person has the opportunity to speak twice. This means that if you missed something that you wanted to say first time, or if more comes for you, you have the chance to share it.

4. Spontaneity invites group members to speak from their present moment experiencing. You do not need to hold onto something you want to say, until it is your turn, When it is your turn, you can pause a moment and sense into your body for what is there now for you to share.

How to set up a Council

- You can create a space for Council, by bringing in some flowers and a candle. People sit in a circle; even better if it can be outdoors.
- Have a 'talking piece' ready for use in the centre. This can be a stick, or a stone that fits well in your hand. The talking piece is taken by the first person who wants to share, and is then passed around the circle.
- Invite someone in the circle to light the candle and offer a dedication to the world in some way. This provides a larger context, and an intention towards service.
- It can be helpful to have a theme; something that unites the group and gives it focus.
- At the end of the Council, someone from the group blows out the candle with a dedication for the world.

At Cambridge

Eight of us gathered at Cambridge, and shared our responses to the theme 'what it is to be human at this time in the world'. It felt to me to be a profound, intimate and heartfelt sharing. We listened to each person as they shared how they felt about some of the great challenges facing us at this time. More came from this sharing, and our understanding and compassion deepened.

Biographical information

Fiona Parr is a TIFI Focusing Coordinator, and a British Focusing Association Focusing Practitioner, Teacher and Mentor. She is also an MBACP counsellor. She has been teaching the Focusing Skills Certificate Course for 15 years. She offers one-to-one Focusing sessions and a professional Focusing training programme.