

A Brief History of Circle

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There is evidence of spiritual ritual gatherings occurring possibly as early as 300,000 years ago in Middle Paleolithic societies, although little is known about the complexity of these gatherings. Actual evidence is found that communities gathering for spiritual and shamanic experience have been evidenced in the Upper Paleolithic societies (over 30,000 years ago, long before modern humanity). Although there is no written history, there is evidence of ritual art, paint, and other religious ceremonial relics, including the first representations of the revered female form. This means that human beings have been gathering in purposeful circle for a very long time and that the central representation of divinity was feminine. Women equally participated in circles around the fire for ritual and did the same as they prepared food for families and community. During these times they shared stories and tribal experience. Societies were egalitarian in earlier human stages. We are well familiar with Stonehenge and its mystical ring of gigantic stones, but in her article, Gather the Women's Ann Smith notes that "In contemplating the power of circle [she] likes to look at the images of the first temple in the world built as a circle of standing stones 12,000 years ago by hunter-gatherers in a place called Gobekli Tepe, Turkey. In this archeological dig six circles have been found with more to be uncovered. [It is relevant to recognize that the famous] Stonehenge came 7,000 years after." Tragically, from the onset of patriarchal ideology, and related religious influences, this began to change approximately 6,000 to 4,000 years ago. This was accompanied by an emphasis on increasing cognitive development, resulting in more linear thinking and behaviors. Prior gathering in circle was replaced to meeting in lines. In this way, both men and women became passive receivers of information and instruction from persons in leadership positions. Thus community and egalitarianism were replaced with patriarchy and resulting divisiveness. Although it became a male-dominated world, it is important to know that there are a few matriarchal societies existing in our world at this time. Regardless, the dominant metaphor became more linear in that the male-dominated patriarchal model turned away from circle, and hence, from authentic connection. Many indigenous groups still gather in circles, for example, Native Americans, the Maasai tribe of Kenya in ritual circle. These groups regularly gather in circle to confirm the identity of the community through ritual, story-telling, dance and music. In ancient times, both men and women shared stories around the fire, and, in fact, they still do in indigenous tribes. These gatherings provide meaning and direction in life. Gathering in circle is a vital element in human life, and increasing numbers of women are discovering its potency for healing, meaning-making and enriching communications, and all the numerous countries throughout Mother Earth where people still engage.

The Newer Movement of Women Meeting in Circle

Back in the 80s a feminist movement began with the idea that meeting in circle was a feminine way to share stories and promote healthier communication. It was taking place with Western women and also as far away as Africa. They were remembering, consciously or unconsciously, the importance of circle and healthier ways of gathering. In that there is tremendous support that both men and women met in circle as early as 300,000 years ago, it is not accurate to believe it is only related to the feminine gender. What happened was that as the male image became dominated through patriarchal ideologies and related behaviors, many human beings lost the

community that was once encouraged by circle and communal gathering. Historically, earlier societies were naturally more matriarchal as lineage had been based on the mother rather than the father. The rise of patriarchy also meant that lineage would be based on paternity. This new movement of women in circle represented a return to pre-patriarchal communal connection. Naturally, these wise women, particularly with the circle movement increasing throughout the latter part of the 1980s (as discussed in *The Goddess Remembered* and in the numerous books emerging in the late 80s and 90s), recognized circle to be a non-patriarchal way of gathering. It was thus a return to a more feminine and egalitarian way of communal experience. This has resulted in the increasing movement and return to circle gatherings throughout the last 30+ years. Although the indigenous have always maintained communal circle, this is a new movement for the modern women. (Even progressive schools and various meeting places have moved desks and chairs, so that participants are looking at one another as opposed to the more linear expectation of looking at the back of someone's head.) The association of the feminine with this movement is because egalitarian ways of being are more associated with a healthier sense of gender as experienced in pre-patriarchal times. When we meet in circle we join to hold everyone in sacred space and purpose. We are bringing forth an ancient way of connecting into modern times. We gather to share stories, to deepen our identities individually and in group—often with the intention to enable and shape a post-patriarchal way of being. We also gather to heal life. We can meet in circle to share our joy, we can meet in circle to work on projects or join in ritual at various levels of depth and purpose, and we can meet in circle to help to change our world. Jean Shinoda Bolen added to this movement in creating the Millionth Circle Movement. Her idea is to both increase and unite the circle movement so that we reach a tipping point and our united goals for a healthier humanity and planet can facilitate a morphogenetic shift as our united mind creates a significant and positive transformation in the human field of consciousness. Thus our vision and hope for a better world will become a reality. Gather the Women has emerged to support this movement. The emerging reality would be a genderbalanced world, a healthier world for nature and all species—for we are all related.