

THE STORIES WE TELL

At Hidden Roots, participants find comfort and community in the ancient practice of talk circles. BY NINA KAUFELT

In Virginia, when I was 8 years old, we sold our home-grown tomatoes, zucchini, peppers and pumpkins at small roadside tables in the towns near our farm, and my parents often left me to manage the stand. Although I enjoyed eating raw corn and tomatoes for lunch and making change from the Danish butter cookie tin, I was often lonely. We were also poor; that winter my parents took odd jobs to make ends meet.

In 1980, we attended our first farmers market, in the parking lot of the Arlington County Courthouse. Markets were just emerging, and our farm soon became profitable—modestly profitable, to be sure, but we never needed off-farm income again. I thrived, too. Meeting other farmers and the city dwellers who loved our basil and blueberries gave me a social life apart from home and school. Going home after market, the hand-sewn apron filled with cash, I was filled with pride and new ideas.

Farmers markets have been a part of my life ever since, and I often go back, not only for the food, but also for the feeling. Farmers feed me with stories about the crops, the animals, the weather. Many of us spend too many hours in the digital world, and life in any large city is typically speedy. Even though we live in walkable, sociable Greenwich Village, I long for



Like trees, humans share deep, underlying connectivity.

deep and quiet conversation, and I've found it in an ancient and simple practice: storytelling circles.

Circles are very old. Danish tribal leaders sat in circles 5,000 years ago, and Native Americans still do. The technology of the circle is primitive. We are seated comfortably, arranged intimately so that we see each other face to face. We're equal: The talking piece travels a circular path, without hierarchy. The candle plays the role of campfire: It centers, comforts and mesmerizes, just as when humans harnessed fire a million years ago.

Our circles are deceptively simple. We tell true stories. The woman with the talking piece has the floor. We pose a simple, open-ended question: Tell a story about a time you did the right thing/took a risk/began to thaw. We listen deeply, and when the speaker finishes, the talking piece moves on.

With respect and confidentiality, there are no borders on what we share: pain, loss, doubt—and also

pride, joy, ecstasy. There is a limit, however, on the size of the circle. Humans can only remember so many names, faces and stories. We need intimacy, time and intention to look beneath the surface, beyond assumptions we attach to superficial qualities such as dress, accent, ethnicity or profession.

Basic principles guide us. The first is authenticity. Our

stories are true. The second is spontaneity. We don't plan stories in advance. Third, we are lean. We say all that we need to say, no more and no less. Fourth, we listen without analysis or judgment.

The circles are called Hidden Roots, after the vast, connected root system in a mature wood, which allows trees to share nutrients and information, thereby keeping the entire forest healthy. Hidden roots connect us all, but in the rush of daily life we may overlook our mutual ties, deep ties that appear, Brigadoon-like from the mist, when a good circle gets going.

As a little girl, I found a lively and nourishing community in farmers markets. Sitting in an intentionally crafted circle allows for a deep conversation, one that stays with me for days. We rise from the circle unburdened of our stories and with new stories thrumming in our heads, with an open heart, and a crackling connection to other humans. hidden-roots.com 🌿