

Constellation as Ceremony

Walking in the Universal Indigenous Field & Honoring the Circle

By

Francesca Mason Boring

In working with Native American communities, and coming from an indigenous tradition, on my mother's side, as well as having spent many years working in Native Community, I was aware of injurious dynamics in native communities which are well known: substance abuse, poverty, and educational inequity, etc.. What did not receive as much discourse was the presence of ancient, reliable resources. One resource I have been aware of is the integral use of ritual and ceremony to restore health and wholeness to communities and individuals who have been disempowered. These are often group events which are designed to restore health to not only the individual, but also have the extended intention of healing the system.

Having the advantage of working with constellation in communities which are already historically attuned to ancestral trauma and an 'indigenous knowing field' (terminology may be different, but the field is the same) it became evident that one way to introduce constellations would be through ritual.

I use the words ritual and ceremony interchangeably. Perhaps technically a ritual is the container for ceremony, but I cannot imagine a ritual without the posture and intention of Ceremony, for me there is no separation between the two. When I speak of indigenous fields, I am referring to the knowing fields which were accessed and respected by every ancient people who were indigenous to every place on the globe.

When facilitating constellation, I smudge with sage in advance of the group coming together. Most people are familiar with smudging which involves the burning of some plant, herb, or incense for the purpose of clearing. In some locations, it is not possible to smudge due to fire codes, alarm systems, or the policy of the facility regarding smoke; in that case I smudge in a homeopathic way. I simply walk with the sage, or sweet grass, or cedar, and privately make the same invitation. Even without the smoke there is the same intention.

While I am smudging I ask the ancestors to be present and to supervise my work. I ask them to bring their family safely, and if it is not a good thing for their family, I ask the ancestors to prevent their attendance- in a gentle way. I also ask the land that I am standing on for permission to work in that place. I acknowledge the ancestors and people of that place and tell them that I am aware that I am only a guest and I ask them to bless me and to give me permission to work in their land. If there is neither time nor opportunity, I say the same prayer in advance of going to any location. Working in the "field" in most indigenous traditions, required some affirmation of humility and agreement that something other than ego, or self, is at work. This is what I am remembering when I prepare myself and the space.

When I am working in Native Community a native elder usually opens the circle in prayer. I have also invited yoga masters, pastors, monks, and musicians to open the circle, to allow individuals present to consider that we are in a sacred space. This “knowing field” has been used in healing for many generations and has often been accompanied by a belief or traditions which indicate that there is a respect for this ‘place’- this ‘field’.

There is a particular ritual which I will share in detail; it is another frequent ‘prayer’ that I open with. This ceremony allows each person bring their voice into the Circle by introducing themselves by name, and then stating: ‘I am the daughter/son of (naming the parents). I am the grandson/granddaughter of (naming paternal and maternal grandparents). This is a “Circle technology” which was traditionally used in many native gatherings, particularly when individuals came from different tribes to try to gain a point of consensus, to meet as part of an extended community for the purpose of socializing, sharing resources, or conflict resolution.

There are a number of understandings which come with this tradition. One principle employed in this opening is the acknowledgement that each person, each voice in the circle is valid and valuable. Each person represents their family and each family brings resources to the group. Each family has survived numerous hardships: illness, loss, war, and the other challenges that come with life over many generations. In advance of the opening, a statement is made that normalizes and invites all possibilities in the family lineage to be included and spoken. This ritual reinforces what constellation work celebrates; whatever people did or could not do- life continued in a perfect way.

Another important point in introducing this ceremony is that each family story has a place. Adoption, missing fathers, step parents, foster- parents, each has a place in the Circle. Introducing this ritual in communities which do not have similar ritual, it has become clear that at times it is important to introduce a protocol which indicates that we are going around the Circle and each person is not to be interrupted. In some communities there is a strong systemic pressure for people to be ‘right’; if someone makes a mistake in describing their family history, or uses a different pronunciation of a name, some feel obliged to interrupt with correction. It is good to present some instruction that this is for the purpose of introducing and welcoming the individuals and honoring the family systems represented in the Circle. Pronunciations and other issues are not the pressing issue in this ritual.

This seems a simple exercise. It has been a surprises for me to see how specifically this opening compliments family constellation, the opening of the field, and the service of those in the Circle. It has been a further point of interest to hear from numerous facilitators how incorporating this opening of the Circle has also supported their work as a facilitator.

In facilitating an Ancestor Honoring Talking Circle I use a prayer fan. In most cases I have had a prayer fan which was made for me, in prayer, by a traditional elder. The prayer fan, or for some a talking-stick, will guide the Circle and make clear who is in the position to speak. In most North American Native Traditions the Talking Circle moves clock-wise, but for some North West Coast tribal traditions the talking circle moves counter-clockwise.

It is apparent that there are times when something else (something other than the prayer fan) wanted to open the Circle. In one location, most members of the Circle were descendents of ancestors who had worked in the coal industry. It happened that we had a piece of coal available and that was what was held by each representative as they spoke. In fact, the Coal was a part of the ancestral Circle, had sustained most of the families in the Circle, and was present with us in honoring the ancestors of the participants who were present- as well as their labor.

A facilitator from Ireland shared with me that she had opened a Circle with a precious piece of Irish bog. Each person held in their hand a part of the land that had supported their ancestors for generations.

To best demonstrate the impact that this naming of the ancestors and bringing each voice into the circle has had, I will briefly share some of the specific experiences:

*For one woman it was the first time she said her given name aloud. She had recently found her birth name and felt that it was the right space to say her given name.

*A man had recently found his birth-mother and her name through adoption search and happily was able to introduce her name into the Circle.

*Some individuals state, "I had no father." The facilitator is then prepared in knowing that this is a family system which did not give place to the father, or where the father was not present.

*In more than one instance, where a maternal grandfather had been part of historical atrocities, financially embarrassed, or imprisoned- the client was able to state the mother's maiden name, but said, "I do not know the name of my mother's father." The surname of the father was known, but not spoken in the Circle.

*Opening the Circle in this way allows both the client and the facilitator to see 'who is missing'? It is not unusual that one side of the family is not remembered, or an individual grand-parent is unknown.

*When opening, it is often helpful that a facilitator can observe when an individual becomes very emotional at the mention of a parents name; this has not been unusual- particularly when one of the parents has recently died, or is seriously ill. The facilitator has an opportunity to check in with the participant after the opening circle to see how fragile the individual is; how can they best be supported?

* When there is a participant who is usually shy, this ritual encourages and initiates equal participation. Conversely, for participants who are more gregarious and might dominate the group, the structure of the ritual limits their time and contribution. This sets a tone for the Circle to become a community with each person and family having the experience of mutual respect and equal footing.

*This ritual is an early indicator if there is someone in the group who has hearing impairment. If there is an individual who is frequently asking neighbors to repeat what others have said, it is a good time to make a mental note that this person may benefit from a conversation, and it is a reminder to state that this ritual is not only for the purpose of "hearing" the names, but rather for the purpose of "bringing" the names, and the ancestors into the Circle.

I honor Constellation work. It is providing a venue for working with trans-generational stress in Native communities and elsewhere. I honor the way that indigenous traditions have approached the 'Knowing field' for millennia.

My sense is that it may not require humility to work with systemic structures, to propose systemic theory, to facilitate in a linear way, moving from the point of systemic philosophy and structure. However, all indigenous traditions caution against walking in the 'knowing field' without humility. This ancient opening of the Circle is a compliment to constellation work and respects and honors the universal indigenous knowing field.

With the support of the ancestors, the Circle, and the land, we are able to stand and walk in safety, strength and humility in the ancient, universal indigenous knowing field.

Copyright 2010 Francesca Mason Boring

10,568 characters (including spaces)

Written for: Praxis der Systemaufstellung