Sacred Circle Guidelines
a work in progress

Produced for
Australian Witchcamp
Healesville, VIC 2011
"We cannot change the world alone. To heal ourselves, to restore the earth to life to create the situations in which freedom can flourish, we must work together in groups."

- Starhawk, Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power Authority and Mystery.

**Introduction**

The purpose of these guidelines is to offer some suggestions as to how you might establish an ongoing, self-sustainable spiritual community based on Reclaiming principles.

Whether you call that a coven, circle, group, co-op, collective or grove is up to you. We call it a Circle for the purpose of these guidelines.

These are guidelines not rules. Guidelines outline the understandings we share about how we cooperate and function as a collective. They are an attempt to outline in words some of the assumptions and expectations you may share when participating in a Circle.

One of the essential principles of Reclaiming is to promote inherent self-worth. From that perspective you will discover how best to evolve your own Circle. As we change and grow together so these guidelines are ever-evolving. While our focus is upon balance and harmony we encourage diversity. Bring suggestions to the Circle and to the wider Australian Reclaiming community forums. Differing perspectives, friction and even conflicting views can be our most fertile ground for growing stronger and closer.

As you move on into the Reclaiming experience we challenge you and invite you to evolve these guidelines and, like a spontaneous ritual, create a community that is both recognisably Reclaiming and inherently unique and special for your collective spiritual needs.

Blessings.

— Margi Curtis
Wollongong, April 2011

**Acknowledgements**

These guidelines are adapted from a document called Web Ways. Web Ways was compiled and written and revised by a collective of women known as Womens Web, a circle of women meeting in Wollongong since 1995. Web Ways was originally devised and developed by women of the Third Cycle of Women’s Web between March and June, 2000. Compiled by Margi Curtis. Revised in full by women of the Seventh Cycle of Women’s Web, 2004. The Induction Process was added in 2009. Since its inception Web Ways was compiled without references or footnotes. If copyright is infringed it is not intentional.

Further adaptations and addition of resources have been made by the Australian Reclaiming Community in preparation for Australia’s inaugural WitchCamp, 2011.

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Principles of Unity

"My law is love unto all beings..." The Charge of the Goddess

"The values of the Reclaiming tradition stem from our understanding that the earth is alive and all of life is sacred and interconnected. We see the Goddess as immanent in the earth's cycles of birth, growth, death, decay and regeneration. Our practice arises from a deep, spiritual commitment to the earth, to healing and to the linking of magic with political action.

"Each of us embodies the divine. Our ultimate spiritual authority is within, and we need no other person to interpret the sacred to us. We foster the questioning attitude, and honor intellectual, spiritual and creative freedom.

"We are an evolving, dynamic tradition and proudly call ourselves Witches. Honoring both Goddess and God, we work with female and male images of divinity, always remembering that their essence is a mystery which goes beyond form. Our community rituals are participatory and ecstatic, celebrating the cycles of the seasons and our lives, and raising energy for personal, collective and earth healing.

"We know that everyone can do the life-changing, world-renewing work of magic, the art of changing consciousness at will. We strive to teach and practice in ways that foster personal and collective empowerment, to model shared power and to open leadership roles to all. We make decisions by consensus, and balance individual autonomy with social responsibility.

"Our tradition honors the wild, and calls for service to the earth and the community. We value peace and practice non-violence, in keeping with the Rede, "Harm none, and do what you will." We work for all forms of justice: environmental, social, political, racial, gender and economic. Our feminism includes a radical analysis of power, seeing all systems of oppression as interrelated, rooted in structures of domination and control.

"We welcome all genders, all races, all ages and sexual orientations and all those differences of life situation, background, and ability that increase our diversity. We strive to make our public rituals and events accessible and safe. We try to balance the need to be justly compensated for our labor with our commitment to make our work available to people of all economic levels.

"All living beings are worthy of respect. All are supported by the sacred elements of air, fire, water and earth. We work to create and sustain communities and cultures that embody our values, that can help to heal the wounds of the earth and her peoples, and that can sustain us and nurture future generations."

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

A circle, group or coven meeting regularly and identifying as part of the Reclaiming Community would benefit from adopting the Reclaiming Principles of Unity. We advise newcomers to Reclaiming to consider these principles as values to which they and their group may aspire, rather than as necessary established ways of being.

As your group evolves it may be useful for newcomers to have a short succinct statement of identity or purpose so that they, and everyone continuing in the group knows what they are joining, and what they are about.

MEETINGS & RITUALS

Communication & Connection

To facilitate communication it is wise to share your contact details (including hard copy for the sake of equity) which is updated regularly. You may choose to meet once a week or fortnight, or even once every Festival – which is generally every six weeks according to the Wheel of the Year. Your Circle may devise a different calendar that follows local seasons. For the purpose of these guidelines we will assume you are meeting monthly.

Setting the Space

The nature of the space within which a Circle meets needs to be prepared and entered into consciously. Ritual can be performed anywhere as long as there is awareness about the energies required and involved and invoked. Generally if you keep the setting simple it becomes easier to sustain than if you make a ritual too elaborate.

For example: If you are meeting in your homes, or back yards you may need to prepare the energy in a way that will suit your collective needs. For example, meditation requires a guarantee that you won’t be interrupted. If children or partners need to be present design the meeting or ritual with interruptions in mind. If you are meeting outdoors and want to light a fire or candles in pots, it is wise to understand the local customs regarding Fire regulations.

Altered States

A change in consciousness is common in Reclaiming rituals: from a light trance through chanting or drumming, to deeper shamanic states or inner transformation. If there is a possibility of interruption it is wise to choose someone from the Circle who will remain in everyday consciousness in case of interruption. Usually the person facilitating the ritual can perform this function but sometimes the priestess may be invoking the goddess and so someone else needs to become the "dragon" for that kind of ritual.

Gender

If you are performing a Reclaiming style ritual you may consciously choose to enter this space imaging the divine in human form by invoking and honouring the Goddess and the God within each participant. This may involve invoking a sense of the divine as connection to the
planet or the cosmos, as well as Goddesses and Gods throughout Herstory & mythology, or the divine as She/He manifests in our everyday lives, or any other way that suits the purpose of your ritual. In particular, both men and women are encouraged to practice affirmation of the sacredness of womanhood. This is especially evident through a feminist awareness of language as well as imagery. A healthy critique of how we express ourselves helps us learn about our unconscious exclusions of the feminine in our lives. It can lead us to better explore a balance of gender and trans gender issues in our lives.

Creating Ritual Space

**Spontaneous Ritual** may suit particular groups more than planned ritual. Spontaneous Ritual may evolve from a mutual sharing especially arising if a participant comes to the Circle with a pressing life issue. Careful listening to each other can lead to discovering the nature of the ritual and assembling tools from what presents from the environment around. Generally, we don't recommend you do spontaneous ritual with people you don't know very well.

**Planned Ritual** may be more satisfying to some as it can focus upon a theme, provide beautiful poetry or relevant props and sacred tools needed. It may also provide those new to ritual the chance to overcome some nerves with guidance from notes jotted down or a full script. If you have new members in your group or your group is just starting it may be best to begin with something planned. To maintain momentum and not promote burnout we recommend facilitation of each ritual be shared equally around the Circle by voluntary sub-groups, especially once your group grows to more than three or four people. The voluntary Planning Group (we avoid the use of the word "committee") can create and design and prepare for a planned ritual in advance.

*For example:* The Planning Group, a sub-group of volunteers, may meet once or twice during the month to plan, prepare and co-facilitate the next meeting and Ritual. Ideally this group changes from month to month so that everyone in the Circle takes part in the Planning Group at least a couple of times in a Cycle, but with the support of more experienced participants so everyone learns and grows together. It is also a great way to get to know each other.

Witches, the Craft and our spiritual identity

Some participants in your Circle may identify as Witches, some do not at first. Always ask more of each individual if you wish to know more about their individual spiritual background or path. It may not be obvious, so try to avoid making assumptions.
A WAY OF BEING TOGETHER: shared power

Once you have a group willing to form an ongoing Circle it is essential to build trust, and strengthen awareness and understanding of differences as well as what is held in common.

Working with Consensus

Consensus is a valuable tool to begin decision making in a new circle, especially in a small Circle of less than 13 participants. Those with an alternative mind set may be used to using an organic consensus process. If you are not adept at using consensus process decision-making already we have included extensive notes on Consensus at the back of these guidelines and there are many resources available on the internet to help you get started. We recommend that you trial and adopt a specific consensus process with which decisions can be made from the very beginning of your Circle. This way you have a framework of sharing power that is open and transparent, and which can be easily implemented by following agreed steps, or examined by all to make changes right for you.

Facilitation

There is wisdom in always using at least two facilitators per meeting or ritual. We use the term facilitator to generally refer to those planning and running meetings and rituals. This can be interchanged with priestess or priest depending upon roles. When actively employing the consensus process for decision making the facilitator needs to be aware of the process and develop skills to implement it.

Democracy and Consensus

The benefits and pitfalls of both systems may remain an ongoing issues for some Circles. There may be a tendency for those of us used to democratic voting systems to let our frustration push us to recommend, if not demand, a vote – particularly when there are time constraints. We recommend that you remain sensitive to the dynamics around this issue and try to reach a consensus around the implementation of voting so that there are no strong objections within your Circle when voting becomes a good option. Good luck!

Summary of a typical meeting format

The format of a typical meeting may include:

* a shared meal before and/or after the Ritual
* casting the circle - creating an energy circle enclosing sacred space
* check-in - listening time, passing the talking stick, hearing each person’s stories about how they are, their month, or answering a specific question.
* Circle business - opportunity to discuss business, previous & new
* the main “work” of the Ritual
* check-out - expressions of thanks, appreciation, issues raised regarding spiritual direction of the group. Planning for the next circle
* opening the circle - releasing the energies invoked and giving thanks
COMMITMENT & ATTENDANCE

Our Spiritual commitment is to ourselves, our own inner sense of divinity, and to the Circle – the collective or group mind which becomes more than our individual selves when the Goddess is invoked. We trust in our minds and hearts, and when we are in doubt we surrender to the divine, acknowledging something greater is moving in our lives and the life of the Circle.

Length of commitment is best decided upon collectively and not altered once the commitment is made. If a change is necessary then we recommend a re-commitment rite that confirms what length of a new cycle the commitment is for. If everyone is clear about how long their commitment is for then it is more likely that they will work through difficult issues to stay out their commitment and therefore more likely to continue building the life of the community over the longer term.

The Cycle
* A Cycle can be any length of time, preferably three months or more. ("A year and a day" is a common cycle amongst Pagan groups, based upon the lunar calendar or thirteen lunations.)

* Making a personal commitment to be in the Circle for a specific Cycle of time is determined by consensus of those who are making that commitment

* When the time comes to review commitment, those who wish to stay recommit, and those who leave are wished well and offered a brief and appropriate rite of parting so the group mind, the magickal links and bonds or the psyche are loosened.

Opening to new members (See Induction Process below)
* Opening or not opening the Circle to new members is a decision to be made by consensus. That is, if anyone has a strong objection to opening to new members it needs to be respected and worked through, given time.

* For obvious reasons anyone not re-committing to the next Cycle need not be involved in the decision as to whether to open to new members. Those who continue to the next Cycle choose whether to open the Circle.

Withdrawing Commitment
* Participants should feel free to withdraw their commitment to the Circle at any time.

* We suggest that anyone withdrawing their commitment discuss it with another member, if not the whole Circle, beforehand. If this is not possible then a letter with a statement of withdrawal would be much appreciated, along with any explanations/feedback. We strive to support each other to express our truth as freely as possible and can only address our collective shortcomings when we get good constructive feedback from each other.

* Someone may request time out for an urgent reason, or to review their spiritual path.
Recurring Responsibilities

The time and date of meetings is best reviewed and open to negotiation by each new Cycle of the Circle.

In summary responsibilities may include

* equal participation and leadership - volunteering for the Planning Group, planning and facilitating monthly meetings through acquiring confidence in shared leadership (See more detail on Planning Groups below)
* taking a turn in updating a record of meetings and rituals, eg: the Book of Shadows
* hosting - offering our homes if so required and possible
* bringing a plate to share for supper, offering to clean the kitchen/space

Attendance

Commitment includes an expectation that participants in the Circle are capable of regular attendance. Degrees of expectation of attendance may change from Cycle to Cycle according to circumstance as long as there is a conscious consensus about it.

Commitment to attendance allows continuity, builds trust and confidence, and demonstrates a caring attitude to the other participants who are also making the considerable effort.

It can be disruptive to building trust and community if someone is attending irregularly for no good reason. There can be a feeling built up over time that this person or persons are "using" the good will of the others by not pulling their weight with meetings and rituals, or other activities planned by the Circle. Naturally, this attitude will depend upon the nature of your Circle.

If you adopt the approach that attendance at all meetings is ideal and preferable (barring illness, or extraordinary unforeseen circumstances), you have a common expectation at the beginning of your Circle's journey. January can be a difficult month to expect full attendance and so could become traditionally optional due to the Summer holidays.

If you choose to require full attendance then it is wise to plan your holidays or social events with family or friends carefully so they rarely coincide with Circle meetings and rituals, unless totally unavoidable. This involves a level of understanding from our “significant others” that the Circle takes priority in our lives at that time of the month for the given Cycle of commitment.

If someone comes under pressure from someone or something outside the Circle which interferes with their full participation, please encourage them to bring their concerns to the Circle, or discuss them with another Circle member.

You may choose to include a "time-out" option when unforseen circumstances like lengthy illness or travel overseas arises.

Keep in mind that when we feel challenged by something we tend to resist taking part. Unconscious sabotage may result, and life’s circumstances may appear to take over and
prevent us going to a Circle meeting or ritual when overcoming this resistance and attending may be exactly what we need to do.

In all things ask the Goddess what feels best, and in the light of this, the Circle could take heed of your conscious decision not to attend for good reason.

**Inability to attend a meeting**

If you can’t attend send apologies, verbally or in writing, to either someone in the facilitating group, or the relevant host for that Circle meeting, or any other participant who is attending. If you miss 2 consecutive meetings then please contact 2 or more Circle participants, within the following month, to reconnect and catch up. Three people connecting provides the numerological magic of “3”: the power of three, and as this common Pagan chant says:

“Three times around, three times about,
a world within, and a world without!”

**Sharing food and drink**

Keep in mind what others can and can’t eat. The use of alcohol, smoking and/or coming under the influence of mind-altering substances, especially in Ritual Circle, is best avoided. Reclaiming advises you consider making your Circle safe for anyone in recovery, which usually means that no drugs or alcohol will be used, at a meal or in ritual.

If you decide that occasionally wine or other beverage is shared as part of a major celebration please do so mindful of other participant's stories. It is wise to always offer a non-alcoholic alternative if you are sharing "ale" in a "cakes and ale" style ritual meal. If you want to bring something as part of a celebration, say for someone's birthday, we recommend that you check with that meeting’s Planning Group whether bringing it is appropriate to the theme and content of the ritual or meeting.
CONFIDENTIALITY

The following are some guidelines around confidentiality. Remember, we are all learning about being together. The following guidelines are a product of several years of reflection and compromise. Every new Cycle of your Circle brings its lessons, and insights. Again, these are only guidelines and sharing of ourselves is always a risk, no matter where we are.

*Example: From Womens Web Ritual of Commitment - Confidentiality*

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" We promise to keep sacred
the struggles, the growth
the joys, the pains
of the woman, the circle,
the Ritual, the Web.
Blessed Be."
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Confidentiality is an ongoing, challenging growth process.

We experience at least two levels of confidentiality in Circle: Confidentiality and Deep Confidentiality. Both rely upon the wisdom, honesty, sincerity and genuine caring of each member. But we are not perfect beings despite our best intentions. Keeping an open heart towards each other can be one of our greatest challenges.

In a sacred Circle we are learning about our own individual boundaries, and another's boundaries concerning what can or can’t be spoken about - both within and outside the Circle.

If you live in the same community you may share daily experiences, children at the same school, workplaces, shopping centres etc. We may well relate on different levels as defined by the different places or contexts within which we meet. Confidentiality may or may not apply in all these places. Each new Web Cycle will need discussion and consensus around these boundaries....

* Arriving at a meeting and chatting
* Relaxing and eating dinner together
* Check-in sharing
* Sharing during Ritual, possibly in twos or threes
* Check-out sharing
* After-Ritual supper and chat
* Talking on phone
* Letter Writing
* Coffee in Cafe
* Meeting in street
* Social functions
* Other Rituals, workshops, pagan events outside the Circle

Defining confidentiality, expressing our needs about it, and working with our trust issues around it can be fertile soil for our growth.

**Sharing our own stuff outside the Circle is OK**

You may agree that any Circle member is free to discuss their own experiences of the Circle with whoever they chooses.
You may agree that general descriptions of what takes place in a Ritual are also free to be shared with others outside the Circle. (Spread the “goddess spell”?)

We credit each other with the discretion, sensitivity and common sense to be able to judge who will receive this information with respect for our spirituality.

**Trusting the speaker**

The Circle may adopt a similar approach to confidentiality as we would find in a therapy session or therapeutic setting. This is in order to encourage intimacy, trust and sharing on deeper levels than we might in ordinary social situations.

**Trusting the receiver**

By this we mean that we expect a level of discretion and sensitivity from each participant regarding what she or he may share about another person outside the Circle. Under normal circumstances little if anything about another person’s life would need to be shared outside the Circle.

If in doubt always check with the person concerned.

*For example:* If a woman is overjoyed about being pregnant and shares that with the Circle but has not specifically said in her sharing that this news is OK to share with others outside the Circle, check with her before repeating her news, just in case she still wants it kept private, but has simply forgotten to say so.

**Choosing to breach Confidentiality**

There may be circumstances where we may need to talk to someone about what is taking place in the Circle, just like a therapist needs supervision.

If a strong experience occurs, it may be important to discuss that Circle experience with a partner, close friend or therapist. We recommend that they be briefed about Circle expectations and guidelines of confidentiality and that they agree to abide by them before that confidence is broken. This contains the breach. We ask that the non-Circle confidant with whom you are sharing the confidence is trustworthy. Details of another Circle member’s sharing may be involved. Under these circumstances we encourage minimal disclosure, and vigilance regarding how much is really necessary to share.

*For example:* One woman’s sharing about her pregnancy is followed by a fertility Ritual which has brought up issues for a second woman. The second woman needs to seek advice outside the Web about her feelings. She may need to include the story of what triggered the issue when confiding in a therapist, partner or close friend, as part of her explanation.
Deep Confidentiality (Invoking the “Cone of Silence”)

A Circle member may request deep confidentiality in sacred space which we all agree to honour as the receivers of that confidence. We agree that when this is requested – the Cone of Silence is invoked - anything shared is held in the strictest confidence and never repeated under any circumstances until the person who requested it says otherwise.

Circle participants have the option of leaving the room, and to place themselves out of hearing distance, if they feel unable to receive this level of responsibility or unable to respect the wishes of the person sharing, for whatever personal reasons. Again, this kind of conscious choice needs to be honoured, and if issues arise as a consequence, we advise time be set aside to work through them.

Some ways to heal breaches of Confidentiality

Conflict may arise in the Circle from time to time. We advocate the use of Conflict Resolution tools especially, for instance, where a breach of confidentiality might occur.

Here are some ideas:
* Create Ritual, a spell, or other magickal working at any stage to aid in clearing and healing.
* As an individual member, look at the issues involved for oneself first (eg: work through the Self-Awareness Wheel*) and then proceed to use a Conflict Resolution tool, supported by another Circle member you trust who may be familiar with Conflict Resolution, or guided by resources.

Where appropriate, minimising the Circle's exposure to inflamed discussions can be wise. Here are three steps you could take to resolve conflict:
- You may choose, as an individual member, to find an appropriate time away from the Circle to discuss the breach with the other member involved in the conflict or breach. It may be wise to include a third Circle member as a witness or neutral support if needed.
- As a small group, move to mediation work with as few Circle members as possible.
- As a whole group, when appropriate, finally bring your concerns to the Circle for sharing and/or discussion

Summary of confidentiality

Honouring the Sacred
honouring the sacred
- acknowledging the sacredness of anything shared between Circle participants
- the sacred will hold us and knows our needs better than we do
- the Goddess has a greater perspective on our lives and we cannot control all aspects of the Circle
- trusting the speaker to be able to distinguish whether they need to ask for full confidentiality or not
- trusting the receiver or receivers of the confidence ..... trusting the other people have the discretion and maturity to hold it.
PLANNING GROUP

You may choose to plan ahead or you may choose to select the topic or theme of the next meeting and Ritual at each Circle meeting. The Planning Group is usually made up of participants who are particularly keen to create and develop that topic and theme so planning ahead can be of benefit if someone has a passion to explore a particular theme. There are commonly two or three people in a Planning Group. More can make it difficult to find mutual planning group meeting times. Each Planning Group, and combination of personalities, takes on its own style and flavour. Taking part in a Planning Group is ideally great fun, and is a good way of getting to know each other better.

Allocation of responsibilities

It is expected each Circle participant will volunteer for the Planning Group at least two or three times a Cycle. Depending upon the number of people in the current Circle, direct involvement in responsibilities for facilitation and hosting usually adds up to no more than half a dozen meetings in an average yearly Cycle.

If you are meeting in people's homes we advise that the person hosting a Circle meeting not be on that month’s Planning Group as they will have enough to do preparing the space for the meeting.

Starting Out

While you are getting to know each other it can be useful to meet, check-in and see what might arise as material for a spontaneous ritual. On the other hand, mostly we have found that people need things planned if they are very new to creating ritual.

Ideally the work distributes naturally via the good will of each participant. Planning ahead with a rostered monthly connection between names and themes is an option which can help ensure that work is evenly shared. (Keep in mind that a Sacred Circle is much more than a string of successful personal growth workshops. Too mechanical a system can rob the Circle of its organic community feel and distance us from each other and the pressing circumstances of each other’s lives.)

Dancing between art, design and nature

Inevitably there will be times when the work falls to a diligent few. We endeavour not to “rescue” - that is, no Circle participant need do more than an equal share of the work, or anything she or he does not want to do. If something remains undone because someone has been slack then it can be useful to reflect upon that aspect of the ritual and how it could be done more effectively next time. Sometimes we become overly enthusiastic and over prepare which becomes unsustainable in the long term. This is a dance between what feels essential, what feels ideal and the practicalities of our day lives.

As a member of the Planning Group we may be required to:

* provide creative insights and input
* strive for feminist consciousness regarding materials and resources used
* listen to and learn from each other, improving our facilitation skills
* share leadership within the Planning Group
* take responsibility for an equal share of the facilitation
* do research - affirming writings or music by feminists where possible
* meet with others in the Planning Group, once or twice during a month, as arranged within the group.
* help in a mail-out – snail mail or online post or both - to the whole Circle with a letter outlining the details of the coming meeting
* a volunteer from the Planning Group to record meeting/ritual in the Book of Shadows

**Circle Letter**
We have found that despite our best intentions life distracts us from commitments to Circle. A regular reminder is necessary – particularly for very busy families.

If you have time, make the letter like an invitation with images, colours, drawings or lettering appropriate to your theme. It can be a special way of honouring your spiritual practice.

The letter or email may include:
* themed title
* introduction to the night
* date, place, time, what to bring
* names of the Planning Group for contact
* and a Check-In question (optional) including time for thoughtful preparation

**Withdrawal from a Planning Group**
If, during the month, something develops - like illness or work and family stresses - which prevents us from fulfilling our responsibilities within the Planning Group the onus needs to be on us, not on the other Planning Group members, to arrange alternatives, including a replacement, unless otherwise agreed upon by the Planning Group.

**Ritual Elements each Planning Group may provide to the Circle**
* facilitation (these skills can be explored and developed on an ongoing basis)
* when dividing into subgroups for deeper work those subgroups be made up of no less than three participants
* Ritual tools and objects, CDs, handouts, songs & chants
* arrive early or on time as agreed upon by Planning Group
* setting up the Ritual space - minimum typically includes
  * four candles for the four directions/elements
  * a centre candle for altar which usually resides on floor in the centre
  * five cloths as altar covers
  * sacred objects for altar where appropriate
  * candles for each divinity invoked (usually in centre)
  * talking stick (object easily held in the hand and passed on)
  * Book of Shadows
  * folder or box or ongoing notes and resources like chant sheets
  * Bag or box to house ongoing ritual tools held in common for the Circle
  * easy access to a CD/Tape player (unless outdoors)
  * other tools relevant to the meeting and Ritual
  * arranging seating space for all, including older people or disabled
* clearing the space after the Ritual, returning it to how it was before
* someone to take responsibility for storing the Circle tools and resources till next meeting. (Again, we advise this role be rotated where possible so no one person feels either "put upon by" or "possessive of" the Circle.)

**LEAVING THE CIRCLE**

It is ideal that participants fulfil their commitment to see out a Cycle. Sometimes life intervenes and someone simply can't continue coming. Sometimes someone finds the Circle is not what they thought it was. Sometimes there are irreconcilable differences in spiritual practice that emerge, sometimes there are personality clashes that are not resolving.

**Merry Part**

In any case it is good to have a Leave-taking Rite or process that works for you all.

*For example:* In Womens Web if the woman who is leaving is present the facilitators of the Circle invite her to stand in the centre. With everyone standing and in close attention the facilitators invite the woman to close her eyes and then slowly spin the woman "widdershins" or clockwise, while saying:

*By the earth that is Her body*
*By the air that is Her breath*
*By the power of Her bright spirit*
*And the living waters of Her womb*
*The Circle is open by unbroken*
*May the peace of the goddess go in your heart*
*Merry meet, and merry part*
*And merry meet again.*

*Generally other women join in the prayer and by the end the energy has raised and released. Sometimes we follow this with a bee-hive hum, where everyone clusters in about the woman in the centre and hums until it feels complete. Sometimes we just have a group hug.*

If you are new to Circle work you will be surprised at how intimately you connect with someone, no matter how little you know them in your everyday life. Even losing someone after only a few rituals can have an impact on the psyche. Whether the person is present and leaves with a blessing or not it is good practice to acknowledge that a magickal bond has been forged and needs to be released – for the Circle as well as for the individual.

A useful if conventional way of doing this is to bring a card to the next convenient Ritual or meeting and all write sacred messages to the one leaving, either on separate slips of paper which can be placed inside the card (gives the feeling of intimacy and one-to-one communication), or write directly on the card.
FURTHER GUIDELINES TO EXPLORE

Please follow up with your own research and resources regarding facilitation in the light of the values expressed by the Principles of Unity.

Roles of Facilitators
Development of a clear outline of the qualities and tools of facilitation in the Circle.

* Tools for Facilitation
* Expanding your Terms of Relating, terms which could help bring more clarity to the Circle, like "validation" or "discounting".

* Facilitation Roles - Time Keeper, Energy Watcher, “priestessing” roles

Of particular value in Dreaming the Dark are Starhawk's reflections on the cycles of group transformation to be found in Chapter Seven, "Circles and Webs: Group Structures".

"The structures of immanence are circular: clans, tribes, covens, collectives, support groups, affinity groups, consciousness-raising groups. In a circle, each person's face can be seen, each person's voice can be heard and valued." (Dreaming the Dark, P115.)

There is an enormous wealth of insight in Truth or Dare: which Starhawk describes as a psychology of liberation. You can find her wisdom around coven formation in Chapter 10, "Toward Community: Structure and leadership in Groups".

"For a group to become a place of healing and liberation, each individual must see herself or himself as responsible for the group... anyone who is part of a group is part of the group mind and spirit, and so influences and shapes the group." (Truth of Dare, P 256.)

Sacred Circle Tools
Create guidelines for your own History/Herstory, purpose and function of the Book of Shadows, resources acquired and your Circle's Magic Tools.

Conflict Resolution, the Self-Awareness Wheel and other Process Work
We advise that you acquire useful processes that you all agree upon which help deal with any conflict that arises. Friction is a necessary part of a healthy system that is growing, and differences can be welcomed and worked with to enhance the Circle. Occasionally you will find that your boundaries are set and some differences are irreconcilable. Apart from Reclaiming teachings, Astrology and Tarot, some self help resources to explore include:

Myers-Briggs Personality Profile  
http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/
The Enneagram http://www.enneagraminstitute.com/
EXPANDING THE CIRCLE

You may decide that your Circle takes all comers. You may decide that your Circle grows by invitation. If you decide to opt for growth by invitation the following process may help.

Introducing Potential New Members to the Circle

The following steps outline one way of ensuring as best as possible that new members of the Circle are informed about what it is they are joining.

Starting the Induction Process

At the end of each commitment cycle, participants will decide whether to open the circle to new members or not. If the Circle is to be opened, members may suggest the names of people who they know are interested. If there are no suggestions then there is no need for the process.

If there are suggestions consensus needs to be sought regarding the invitation of these people. There may be objections raised. The use of Consensus Process Decision-making is essential here to arrive at consensus as to whether the new member or members can be invited. Once consensus is gained, one or two Circle members could take on working through the induction process for the potential new members. (It is preferable that the Induction process not be run by participants already involved in the Planning Group for the next Circle as it is quite time consuming).

Induction steps

The Induction workers will send each potential new member a copy of the Circle Guidelines (as amended for your Circle) and an invitation to meet with a group of Circle members outside the established Circle meeting time to discuss the Circle Guidelines and answer any questions. This meeting is also an opportunity for Circle members to ask questions and/or raise any concerns they may have with the potential new members.

Once a mutually agreeable date and venue has been set by the Induction workers with the newly invited potential member, other Circle members may also be invited to attend if they are interested and available.

At the end of the meeting, the potential new member(s) will be advised that someone will contact them shortly to see if they are still interested in trying out the Circle in its open phase.

The Induction workers will then contact all current Circle members who were present at the meeting with the potential member(s) to see whether they are still happy to invite the potential new member(s) to the group. If no-one objects, the potential new member(s) will be invited to attend an open phase of the Circle if they are still interested.

If the potential new member decides not to pursue the Induction Process the Induction workers may accept this rejection with good grace.

If there are any objections from current Circle members to proceeding with the invitation of
the potential new members then the Circle needs to have agreed upon a plan that enables the rejection of the potential new member with the minimum of offence possible. This could be done by the Circle member who put forward their name or by the Induction workers, or whatever suits the situation.

**Open Phase of the Circle**

Once there is agreement amongst all parties the potential new member will be contacted by the Induction workers and sent the relevant information about the next Circle ritual or meeting.

We suggest exploring the new Circle over a period of three meetings consisting of

- a Spontaneous night - where a ritual emerges from what participants have brought with them, what has been shared in Checkin or other spontaneous inspiration on the night
- a Reclaiming style ritual celebration - planned by a Planning Group
- a seasonal Wheel of the Year ceremony - relevant for your local area, planned by a Planning Group.

Potential new members need to attend at least two of these three meetings so that they can make a decision based on experience and inform the Circle of their choice whether to commit to the next Cycle or not.

**Equal Commitment**

Once the three meetings of the Open Phase are complete we recommend that the fourth meeting is a Commitment ceremony or Rite where all participants commit to the new Cycle with equal enthusiasm.

The new members will require time to get their feet, to learn a little about creating ritual, about facilitation and shared power. They may need to learn many new things about Reclaiming and find following the Principles of Unity quite challenging. At all times their points of view need to be valued and actively sought, or the feeling of them being "newbies" will linger too long and an "us and them" impression can emerge. They also need to learn to take their place in the collective and that their needs will not be instantly met. It takes time to build trust and community so we hope you will be able to reassure each other about the necessity of sharing sacred space and ritual as steps towards spiritual community.

Blessed Be.
FURTHER RESOURCES

Basically many aspects of forming a circle and working with Reclaiming style processes can be supported by accessing:

Reclaiming Community Resources at
http://www.reclaiming.org/resources/index.html

Starhawk's Webpage at
http://www.starhawk.org/index.html

Recommended Reading

Non-Fiction


Starhawk, (1987) Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery, HarperSanFrancisco


Starhawk, Diane Baker, and Anne Hill (1998 ) Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions, Bantum, New York. Communicated in beautiful simple style for children, this treasure trove of story, myth, recipes and games covers the eight festivals of the year, the moon cycle, and the life cycle from birth through adulthood. These are presented with songs, stories, activities, crafts, rituals, and recipes, created with a parent's limited free time in mind. Also a preferred resource of many adults.


Fiction
Starhawk, (1993)*The Fifth Sacred Thing.* (New York, Bantam, 1993) Starhawk's epic tale, set in 2048, California, which beautifully realises a possible future community based along Reclaiming lines.

Magazine/e-zine
*Reclaiming Quarterly*
Reclaiming Quarterly covers Witchcraft and Magical Activism in the Reclaiming tradition. Published since 1980, the current issue of RQ is available as a free download on our website. You can also hear samples from our chant-CDs, browse dozens of photo-features, and more.

http://www.reclaimingquarterly.org/

One Community's Vision for Action

*The Cochabamba Declaration*
"When a subsidiary of Bechtel took over water delivery services in Bolivia, water rates rose so high the poor were spending a major part of their income on water. The people rebelled, mounted an uprising, and won! Here is their declaration. I think it poses exactly the alternative we need to focus on in our thinking, our organizing and our actions." -- Starhawk
http://www.starhawk.org/activism/cochabamba-dec.html
Agendas/Meeting Procedures

Found at http://www.reclaiming.org/resources/consensus/brook.html

From Brook Schoenfield, February '95. Bay Area Nonviolence Preparers Box 40165 San Francisco, CA 94140

BEFORE MEETING (if possible):

Choose facilitator.
Gather agenda items.
Delegate responsibility for each item.
Divide into reports/decisions/announcements.
Bring materials/supplies needed.

AT MEETING:

Connect (game, ritual, song, etc.)
Check-in/excitement-sharing.
Review agenda items.
Prioritize.
Set times.
Choose roles (or rotate):
Go through agenda:
   Take an easy item first (for example, reports, then decisions)
   Break large issues into small parts for discussion/decision.
   Take breaks/play together.
Announcements.
Set next meeting.
Evaluation.
Closing.

TOOLS FOR FACILITATING MEETINGS

Brainstorms.
Go-rounds.
Small group discussions.
Dyads/triads.
Feeling sharing.
Fishbowls.
Participation equalizers.
Straw polls.
Evaluations.
Visual aids.
Pyramiding.
Role plays.
Visions/goals exercises.
TOOLS FOR STRESS/CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Breathing deeply.
Silence.
New games.
Breaks.
Humor.
Back rubs.
Calm voice.
Eye contact.
Feeling sharing.
Active listening.
Modeling opposite viewpoints.
Criticisms/self-criticisms.
Resentment sharing.
Affirmations.
Mediations.

**Important Note:** 1. These tools help bring out a group's particular individuality. Be flexible/creative, and careful not to let the process dominate the group's spirit.

2. Only through use can these ideas be learned. With use will come innovation. Please send suggestions/criticisms of this listing to:

*Bay Area Nonviolence Preparers, Box 40165 San Francisco, CA 94140*
Consensus
The following notes are taken from:
http://www.starhawk.org/activism/trainer-resources/consensus.html

Consensus Process

What Is Consensus?
Consensus is a process for group decision-making. It is a democratic method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust.

Consensus vs. Voting
Voting is a means by which we choose one alternative from several. Consensus, on the other hand, is a process of synthesizing many diverse elements together. Voting assumes that people are always competitive and that agreement can only be reached through compromise. Consensus assumes that people are willing to agree with each other, and that in such an atmosphere, conflict and differences can result in creative and intelligent decisions. Another important assumption made in consensus is that the process requires everyone's participation, in speaking and in listening. No ideas are lost, each member's input is valued as part of the solution, and feelings are as important as facts in making a decision. It is possible for one person's insights or strongly held beliefs to sway the entire group, but participation should always remain equal.

What Does Consensus Mean?
The fundamental right of consensus is for all people to be able to express themselves in their own words and of their own will. The fundamental responsibility of consensus is to assure others of their right to speak and be heard. Since our society provides very little training in these areas, we have to unlearn many behavior patterns in order to practice good consensus process (see "Overcoming Oppressive Behavior," in this handbook). Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is the most efficient way to accomplish something, or that they are absolutely sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, no one felt that her or his position on the matter wasn't considered carefully. Hopefully, everyone will think it is the best decision; this often happens because, when consensus works properly, collective intelligence does come up with better solutions than could individuals.

The Process of Consensus Agreement, at least informally, should be sought on every aspect of group meetings, including the agenda, the times the group should take for each item, and the process the group should use to work through its tasks. The following is an outline of formal consensus, the process a group uses to come to agreement on a particular course of action. First, the problem should be clearly stated. This might take some discussion, in order for the group to identify what needs to be solved. Then discussion should take place about the problem, so the group can start working towards a proposal. The biggest mistake people make in consensus is to offer proposals too soon, before the group has had time to fully discuss the issue. Tools a group can use during this preliminary period of discussion include brainstorming, go-rounds, and breaking up into small groups. When it is
apparent that the group is beginning to go over the same ground, a proposal can be made which attempts to synthesize all the feelings and insights expressed. The proposal should be clearly stated. Then discussion is held on the proposal, in which it is amended or modified.

During this discussion period, it is important to articulate differences clearly. It is the responsibility of those who are having trouble with a proposal to put forth alternative suggestions. When the proposal is understood by everyone, and there are no new changes asked for, someone (usually the facilitator) can ask if there are any objections or reservations to the proposal. It helps to have a moment of silence here, so that no-one feels coerced into agreeing.

If there are no objections, the group is asked "Do we have consensus?" All members of the group should then actively and visibly signal their agreement, paying attention to each member of the group. After consensus is reached, the decision should be clearly restated, as a check that everyone is clear on what has been decided. Before moving away from the subject, the group should be clear who is taking on the responsibility for implementing the decision.

**Difficulties in Reaching Consensus**

If enough discussion has occurred, and everyone has equally participated, [a situation in which a group decision which cannot be supported by everyone should not arise]. But depending on the importance of the decision, the external conditions, and how the process has gone, the group might be on the verge of reaching a decision you cannot support. There are several ways of expressing your objections:

- **Non-support**: "I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along with the group."

- **Reservations**: "I think this may be a mistake, but I can live with it."

- **Standing Aside**: "I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it."

- **Blocking**: "I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is immoral." If a final decision violates someone's moral values, they are obligated to block consensus. A decision by an affinity group spokesperson can only be blocked by an entire affinity group, not by an individual. Blocks will rarely occur if the group has fully discussed a proposal.

**Withdrawing from the group.** Obviously, if many people express non-support or reservations, or leave the group temporarily through standing aside, there may not be a viable decision even if no-one directly blocks it. This is what as known as a "lukewarm" consensus and is just as desirable as a lukewarm bath or a lukewarm beer. If consensus is blocked and no new consensus is reached, the group stays with whatever the previous decision was on the subject, or does nothing if that is applicable. Major philosophical or moral questions that come up with each affinity group should be worked through as soon as the group forms. Discussions about values and goals are as important as discussions about actions to be taken, and too frequently get pushed aside by groups who feel time pressures.

**Roles in Consensus Process**

In large groups, it is helpful to designate roles for people to help the process move along. It is
important to rotate these responsibilities for each meeting so that skills and power can be shared. Ideally, such responsibilities should belong to everyone, and not just the designated person.

**Facilitator**

The facilitator's job is to help the group move through the agreed-upon agenda, and to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak by calling on them in order. Facilitators should see that speaking opportunities are evenly distributed; that quiet people get a chance to speak and people who talk too much are given a chance to listen. The facilitator should observe when the discussion seems to be nearing the point when a proposal could be made. S/he can then call for a proposal or offer one to the group, and after more discussion if necessary, s/he can then guide the group through the check for consensus as outlined above. Facilitators should not use their position as a platform from which to offer solutions; solutions should arise from the group, and no-one should facilitate if they find they have strong opinions on a given issue. A facilitator can always hand over her or his responsibilities temporarily if s/he feels it necessary to step down. The group should not rely upon the facilitator to solve process problems, but should be ready to help with suggestions on how to proceed. Very large groups should use two or more facilitators.

**Vibeswatcher**

Vibeswatchers are useful in large groups where people don't know each other, and their job is to be attuned to the emotional state of the group. Is the group tense, or bored, or too silly? The vibeswatcher might suggest a game, or more light, or open windows, or a group hug. Sometimes simply calling attention to an emotional undertow that may be affecting group process is helpful. Vibeswatchers should also call the group's attention to a person whose anger or fear is being ignored, or to people who may be involved in a dialogue that has its causes outside of the group's activities. Vibeswatchers also should assume the role of "gatekeeper," taking care of any external disturbance for the group.

**Timekeeper**

A timekeeper keeps the group on track by giving the group a warning halfway through that discussion time is running out and by asking the group if it wants to contract for more time on a given issue. Timekeepers should ask if people want to set specific time limits on brainstorm or time allotments to each speaker on go-rounds. Before speaking themselves, timekeepers should be sure that someone else is timekeeping for that period.

**Notetaker**

A notetaker tries to clearly record key points of discussions, the consensus decisions reached by the group, things that were left to be decided later, and who has taken on responsibilities for particular tasks. The group (or the facilitator for the next meeting) should be able to use the notes to construct the agenda for the next meeting. A notetaker can also be helpful during the meeting to remind the group of key points covered in discussion if the group is having trouble formulating a proposal.

It's important to emphasize that every member of the group should try to facilitate, vibeswatch, timekeep, and notetake. Sharing the responsibility ensures that power is distributed equally within the group and makes consensus easier on everyone.
Decision-making During Actions
It is clear that consensus is a time consuming activity. It is therefore important for affinity groups to make their fundamental decisions prior to going to an action. Discuss in advance such questions as: What do we do if faced with a provocateur in our group or a nearby group? How long do we want to stay on site? How do we respond to police strategies designed to keep us away from the site? It helps for an affinity group to define for itself its particular goals, or tone. Such general definitions as "Our group will always go where numbers are most needed," or "We want to be where we will get media coverage," or "We want to leaflet workers inside the site," will help a group make decisions under stressful and changing circumstances. Be prepared for unexpected circumstances by selecting a spokesperson and a facilitator for your group for quick-decision making process during the action. It will be the spokesperson's responsibility to communicate the group's decisions to the action or cluster spokescouncil. It is the facilitator's responsibility to quickly and succinctly articulate the problem to be discussed and to eliminate those points where agreement has already been reached. It is the responsibility of everyone in the group to keep the discussion to a minimum if quick action is called for. If your point has already been made by someone else, don't restate it. A calm approach and a clear desire to come to an agreement quickly can help the process. Don't let anxiety overwhelm your trust in each other or your purpose in the action. Strong objections should be limited to matters of principle.

Tools for Consensus Process
Check-ins
Usually used for introductions, but besides names, people can tell the group how they're feeling (anxious, silly, tired), or what they expect from the meeting (certain decisions, certain length). A group might adjust their agenda according to the emotional state or practical needs revealed by the group during check-in.

Go-rounds
Each person is given a certain amount of time to speak on a particular subject, without having to comment on other contributions, or defend their own. Should be used at the beginning of discussion on an issue, if only a few people are doing the talking, or if the group seems stuck for good solutions.

Brainstorms
A short time during which people can call out suggestions, concerns, or ideas randomly, sometimes without being called on. Helps to get out a lot of ideas fast, stimulates creative thinking. It's not a time for discussion or dialogue. Someone can write down brainstorm ideas on a large sheet of paper so everyone can see and remember them.

Breaking up into small groups
Depending on the size of the original group, this could be from three to a whole affinity group. A small group gets a chance to talk things over for a specified amount of time before reporting back to the large group. This gives people a chance to really listen to each other and express themselves, and is very useful when a group seems unable to come to consensus. In a spokescouncil meeting, breaking up into affinity groups to discuss issues or to make specific decisions is often necessary.
**Fishbowl**

In a large group, or a small group which seems hopelessly divided, a fishbowl helps to make clear what's at stake in particular positions. A few people, particularly those who feel strongest about an issue, sit down together in the middle of the group and hash things out freely for a designated period of time while the group observes them. The people in the middle don't come to any decisions, but the fishbowl gives everyone a chance to hear the debate without involving the whole group; often hidden solutions are revealed.

**Why Use Consensus?**

This tool is good to use when a team is agreeing on how to make decisions, and should involve all team members. The following guidelines from the group "The Change Agency" might help. The Change Agency, an Australian organisation's website: http://www.thechangeagency.org/

**Objectives**

- Enable a team to come to a shared definition of consensus
- Encourage group members to work together before they deal with a decision they must make
- Strengthen the relationships within the group before they make consensus decisions

**Time needed:** 30 minutes

**How it’s done:**

- Have each person write his or her own definition of consensus.
- Divide the group into pairs and have individuals in each pair compare their definitions.
- Then, ask them to re-write their definitions to incorporate aspects of both versions. Ask them to write their definition on a large sheet of paper.
- Group each pair with another pair. Ask the foursome to combine the two definitions into one definition. Again, have them write their new definition on a large sheet of paper. Repeat this process with a foursome joining another foursome; then groups of eight joining another group of eight, etc., until the entire group reaches a single definition of consensus.
- Display the final agreed-upon definition of consensus.

**Debrief Questions:**

- Do all team members understand the importance of consensus versus other methods such as voting in making decisions...?
- How did the definition change as more people became involved?
- To what extent did the final definition resemble the definition given on the main consensus page?
- How did you feel about participating in this process?
- How does the process of reaching consensus compare with other decision-making processes?

**Source:** The Ball Foundation, Education Initiatives project, http://www.ballfoundation.org/ei/tools/consensus/defining.html
Consensus is Not Unanimity: Making Decisions Co-operatively
Adapted from Randy Schutt

What is consensus?
Is it a co-operative, process in which people share their best ideas and come up with superior decisions or a coercive, manipulative, time-wasting process in which those which are most treacherous, are most verbal, or have the most time can get their way? Or is it an idealistic fantasy where every problem always has a good simple solution that incorporates everyone's ideas (no matter how ridiculous) and satisfies everyone completely?

Consensus is not Unanimity
Many people think of consensus as simply an extended voting method in which every one must cast their votes the same way. Since unanimity of this kind only rarely occurs in groups with more than one member, groups that try to use this kind of process usually end up being either extremely frustrated or coercive. Either decisions are never made (leading to the demise of the group, its conversion into a social group that does not accomplish any tasks), they are made covertly, or some group or individual dominates the rest. Sometimes a majority dominates, sometimes a minority, sometimes an individual who employs "the Block". But no matter how it is done, it is NOT consensus.

Consensus is a process for deciding what is best for a group.
The final decision is often not the first preference of each individual in the group and they may not even like the final result. But it is a decision to which they all consent because it is best for the group.

Consensus is a Co-operative Process
Consensus is a process for people who want to work together honestly in good faith to find good solutions for the group. It cannot be used by people who do not, can not or will not co-operate. Consensus should not be attempted in a group with people who want to maintain their wealth and privilege or want to dominate or control others. In these situations, nonviolent struggle would be more appropriate.

Consensus is Not Just a Process, but a Valuable Goal
Consensus is a process that allows everyone in a group to participate and work together nonviolently to make decisions - the ultimate realisation of a true democracy and very attractive to anyone who has ever been dominated or oppressed. It gives people the power to make decisions and also demands that they take responsibility for those decisions. Rather than abdicating power to an individual or representative, it demands that that we take complete responsibility.

Consensus is One of the Best Processes
If not consensus, then what? Usually voting is proposed as a reasonably democratic alternative. But voting is not a meeting process, it is simply a procedure. The goal of a vote is to tally the (existing) preferences of a group of people, and in some logical, fair, and equitable way come up with a good decision. Kenneth Arrow received a Nobel Prize for proving it was impossible to do this except under very simple circumstances e.g. Situations when there are only two possible options. Furthermore, voting necessarily ignores the
intensity of preference, each individual feels or the distribution of consequences that a decision imposes. And even under the best of circumstances, voting necessarily means that some group of people will not get what they want and if severely trampled by the majority, may leave the group or retaliate.

Voting can therefore only produce satisfying decisions where everyone is extremely tolerant or there is unanimity of opinion. Unanimity can sometimes be achieved if one person or group can persuade everyone else of the validity of their perspective and solution. But it the problem has no easy, clear solution, some people are personally devoted to a particular solution, or there is competition for power in the group, the process, will quickly bog down, factionalize, and/or revert to coercion.

Good consensus process gets around these problems by allowing the members of the group to explore in depth the complete range of options and concerns in a non-adversarial, co-operative atmosphere. Discussions in small groups allows everyone, even those who are not verbally adept, to express their ideas, concerns and opinions. Members of the group get a chance to learn from each other’s experiences and thinking, empathise with people with other experiences and backgrounds, and gracefully change their minds as they hear these new ideas and arguments. They can challenge [thoughtless], obsolete, or immoral assumptions and solutions, and they can explore unusual solutions (radical transformations, compromises, bargains etc) that are often overlooked when the discussion gets polarised or restrained by formal proposals. Individuals can offer to give of their time or wealth or to suffer a loss for the good of the group. And people can be persuaded, inspired, loved, or counseled out of their prejudices, biases, and other rigidities or if this fails, nonviolently prevented from acting immorally.

Of course a good process that ends in a vote can also have all these co-operative aspects. In fact, a good voting process may be indistinguishable form a good consensus process until the end. But non-consensual processes usually rely on formal proposals, debates, and other parliamentary procedures that interfere with co-operation. Knowing that there will be an up-down vote at the end often polarises the discussion. Also, if the group should develop a lynch mob or group thinking mentality, there is no avenue for an individual or minority to slow or thwart their immoral decisions.

**Consensus is Not Conflict-free or Painless**

Good consensus process relies heavily on problem-solving, questioning, empathy, self-sacrifice, and nonviolent direct action. In a good process, conflict is not ignored or covered up, but encouraged. Issues and proposed solutions are thoroughly thrashed out until a good solution is found. Like any good nonviolent action, the ideas are severely challenged, but the people involved are listened to loved, and supported. When there are no easy solutions, then individuals must be willing to sacrifice for the good of the group or the group must divide or disband. When one person or a group (minority or majority refuses or is unable to work co-operatively, everyone else must boldly, yet tenderly resist and challenge them, or if necessary throw them out of the group (ideally, offering support and guidance to their next endeavour).
Conflict Resolution Tools

- Appreciations/affirmations
- Active listening
- Restating others viewpoint
- Support groups
- Venting emotions somewhere else
- Gripe sessions
- Resentment sharing

Running Meetings by Consensus

Types of meetings: Problem solving, decision making, planning, reporting/presenting, reacting/evaluating.

Some ingredients of an effective meeting:
- Common focus on process.
- Common focus on content.

Agree on group process: Robert's Rules of Consensus or Free for All or something else.

Content: list all the possible agenda items, either from past agreements (minutes) or by brainstorming. Prioritize (perhaps in order of ease of putting into effect). Agree on how much time each item can have in order to fit meeting length.

The Facilitator remains neutral, does not contribute her/his own ideas, nor evaluate the ideas of others. When time is nearly up for a topic, Facilitator will ask the group if they want to allot more time, stop, or come back to it later. Consensus is reached when no "unresolved concerns" remain. (Applause is nice to acknowledge achieving consensus.)

The Vibes Watcher may interrupt if meeting gets heated to suggest a deep breath or five minute break, remind group of their common goals, etc.

The Names Taker keeps a list of those people who want to talk. (Process questions don't need to wait in line---hold up both index fingers to let Facilitator know you have a process questions.)

The Recorder uses the speaker's own words as much as possible and is willing to make corrections. Neat printing and speed are helpful. Consensed items are circled, volunteers' names and due dates are written next to jobs.

The Timekeeper says, "One minute left" if group has set a time limit for speaking, followed by "Time is up" a minute later. Also responsible for saying, "Five minutes left on this topic" or "Time is up."

The Participants want a way to focus their energy for maximum effectiveness, and are willing to work until actions/solutions are found that all accept, with no unresolved concerns left.

Adapted from How to Make Meetings Work, Doyle & Straus
Stages of Movement Development
(from George Lakey, Trainers for Change)
A resource link found on Starhawk's website:

For those interested in the wider implications of community building the following provides some insight.

1. Cultural preparation
2. Building organizational strengths
3. Drama of repression (Propaganda of the Deed)
4. Noncooperation
5. Parallel institutions

Strategy Questions:
- What are your long-range goals?
- How do you want institutions to look in the new society?
- How will work and trade be organized?
- How will decisions be made?
- How will the next generation be nurtured?

Stage 1: Cultural preparation

- Who should you work with at first?
- Where will you find initiative takers, who will take responsibility, and accept the job of moving things along?
- How do these people see themselves?
- What changes do people need in the way they look at themselves?
- What ideas about themselves need to change in order to be consciously revolutionary?
- What are the changes they need to make in their view of the world?
- What kind of analysis needs to be developed? (Intellectual backfill)
- How can complexity be clarified? Dogma avoided?
- How detailed does the vision of a new society need to be?
- How are our short-term goals, medium-term goals and the vision related?
- What methods of consciousness raising makes sense for the kind of people you want to work with?
- Especially regarding their cultural and economic background, etc.?
- What kind of strategy approaches will be useful?
- What new information can inform decisions regarding strategy?

Stage 2: Organization building (creating model alternative institutions)

- Considering people's historical experience with organizational structures, especially people of colour, women, and other historically marginalized groups, what forms of organization makes sense?
- Looking ahead to stage five where strong organization is necessary, can the form withstand growth?
• How will the new organization provide the social goods of the institution it seeks to replace?
• What is the role of alternative institutions and building the revolutionary movement?
• What is the role of rank-and-file movements in labour? Of radical caucuses in the professions? Of action groups which develop campaigns? Of support groups?
• How can organizational units link? Informal networks? Hierarchical arrangements? Other?
• Which allies need to be reached out to at this stage?
• How can honest and reliable relationships be built between revolutionist and nonrevolutionary organizations and institutions, so each can help the other?
• How can feedback and room for dissent be built into organizations so as not to become rigid or become dominated by elites?

Stage 3: Propaganda of deed

• Who is the "audience," the people who, when watching the drama of confrontation, can be won over to the side of revolution?
• What are the central ideas you want the actions to communicate?
• What are the tactics, or methods, of confrontation which will communicate the central messages?
• Who or what is the opponent of these confrontations?
• What support do people need to get through this state successfully, so they will not back down, become intimidated, or get isolated?
• Conflict tends to polarize. How can the side effects be minimized?

Stage 4: Mass noncooperation

• Whose cooperation is the system dependent on?
• Who can provide the mass space for noncooperation?
• What noncooperation tactics may be appropriate (strike, boycott, tax refusal, slowdowns, etc.)?
• How will noncooperation be coordinated?
• How will the movement's understanding of what is happening be communicated across to people in general, especially when the elite is trying to confuse the issue?
• How can the movement reach out to opponents, and help individuals in the ruling class and bureaucratic command posts cross over to the revolution or at least be supportive in some ways?
• What is the role of the movement in providing services in the middle of economic and social dislocation? For example alternative economic institutions.

Stage 5: Parallel Institutions

• What are the legitimate functions of the old order, the things which have been done which actually need doing even though in different ways? (for example, growing food, and providing transportation).
• How will the movement meet these legitimate functions?
• How can people show their acceptance of new institutions?
• What will happen to the old power-holders?
• What are the actual tactics of power transfer?
• What are the international connections in this process?
• How can we avoid the revolution freezing into new rigidities?
• How can we sow the seeds for continuing flexible growth of the new institutions?
• How can the empowerment of people continue to be deepened and strengthened after the excitement of getting rid of the old order wears off?

(Andrew Rose adds)
"These queries could be asked in relation to all sorts of 'movements' such as:
• Food Not Bombs (serving food directly outside using our kitchens, directing food to people rather than trashing)
• end the war on drugs
• correctional institutions that benefit society, rather than increasing racism and hatred
• providing universal health-care
• housing the homeless, feeding the hungry
• protecting the environment
• democratizing mass media
• reducing corporate control of public institutions
• eliminating monopoly capitalism
• creating alternatives to nationalism, patriotism, jingoism, and violence
• reducing militarism, abroad and at home
• promoting non-violent conflict resolution and social-emotional skills in education"
Grounding and Centering For Activists

Found at http://www.starhawk.org/activism/trainer-resources/groundcenter.html

By Starhawk  (10-15 minutes)

In an action, in any potentially tense of dangerous situation, we need to be able to stay calm, to feel our fear without letting it overrun us or turn into panic. Grounding is a technique that can help us stay both alert and relaxed when all hell is breaking loose around us.

Grounding begins with the breath. Try this: clench your stomach, tighten your muscles, breath up high in your chest. How do you begin to feel? (People often say, "anxious," "Tense," "Panicky.")

Now relax your stomach, let your breath drop down into your belly, into your toes as your belly expands. Do you start to feel different? For some of you, this might be hard to do. At first it might seem unnatural. Put your hand on your belly, breathe so that your belly pushes your hand out. Practice this, sometimes you need time before you can do it easily and naturally.

Now close your eyes for a moment. Imagine that breath pushing down through your feet, through the base of your spine, as if you were a tree pushing down roots. Let those roots go down through the floor, through the soil below us. Imagine they can feel something of the quality of that earth, what it likes to grow, how healthy it is. Push down through the waters under the earth, down through the bedrock, down into the fire below us. If there's still any tension or fear, let that go into the fire and just burn away into pure energy.

Now imagine you can draw some of that fire up. Feel it as the earth's living, creative energy, and bring it up through the rock and the water and the soil. Bring it up into your legs and feet and the base of your spine. Bring it up your spine and let your spine grow like a flexible tree trunk, reaching up to the sky. Bring some fire into your heart, into any place inside you that needs healing or extra energy.

Bring that energy up through your arms and out your hands, and up through your neck and throat and out the top of your head like branches that reach up to the sky and then spread around you and reach back down to touch the earth. They create a protective filter around you. Take a moment, look at that energy web, notice if there's any places that need to be repaired or strengthened. And notice how the energy in this room feels when we all do this.

Now feel the energy of the sun, shining down on your leaves and branches. Breathe deep, draw that energy in. Breathe it down through your leaves and branches, down through your heart and your belly and your hands. Take it in, feed on it like a tree feeds on sunlight.

Now open your eyes. Look around you, notice how other people look to you when you're grounded. Notice what's changed.

When you're grounded, when your energy is linked to the earth energy, you can still move. Imagine your feet have sticky roots, that can sink into the earth and then release when you
move. Walk around a little, really feeling your contact with the earth, feeling those roots grip and release.

Now as you move, stretch your arms out to your sides, as far as they'll go, until you can't see your hands if you look straight ahead. Now wiggle your thumbs, and slowly bring your arms in until your thumbs are just visible on the edge of your peripheral vision. Notice how wide your field of vision can be. As you walk, breathing deep, grounded, activate that peripheral vision. Know that you can be aware of what's going on around you.

And now notice whether you are making eye contact with the people you pass. Keep breathing, stay grounded, keep your awareness wide, but now also make eye contact with each person you pass. How does it feel to be this present in a situation?

Now come back to stillness. As you breathe, feel where it is in your body this grounded place seems to live, and touch that place. Can you find an image for this grounded state? A word or phrase you can say? When you use these three together, touch, image, and phrase, you create an anchor to help you ground quickly in any situation. Try it - use it.

Now relax. How did that go for you all? What did you notice?

Remember, the more you practice grounding, the more automatic it becomes. If you take even a few minutes a day to practice, you'll not only have better energy in your daily life, you'll be able to ground quickly and instantly when you're in a tense situation.

**Grounding Practice Two (5-10 minutes)**

After teaching grounding, divide the group into two. They stand on opposite sides of the room. The first group is told that they will be a loud, screaming, charging group of riot cops, marching across the room. The second group is told to use their grounding anchors and walk through the line of cops. Give a clear start signal. After the first pass through, you can debrief and then reverse roles, or do both turns and then debrief the whole group.

After you've taught this to the group, it's good to give them a chance to practice it in hassle lines or a role play.
Other references

The following books and Websites were used in the original compiling of Web Ways.

Books

*Calling the Circle* by Christina Baldwin

*Wisdom Circles* by Garfield, Spring and Cahill

*Cycles of Group Transformation, from Dreaming the Dark* by Starhawk

*Womens Wheel of Life* by Elizabeth Davies & Carol Leonard

Other books and inspirations from *The Womens Web Resource List*

Web sites

*Agendas/Meeting Procedures* by Brook Schoenfield

*Meeting Facilitation* by Berit Lakey

*Consensus Decision-Making (1) from INVERT*

Reclaiming Web Site - [www.reclaiming.org](http://www.reclaiming.org)