From the USA

HOW CAN DRIFTWOOD SOLVE CONFLICT?

by Kay Pranis

Kay Pranis first discovered peacemaking circles as a way to determine sentences in criminal proceedings. The circles bring together victims, offenders, community members, judges and police officers to discuss how best to respond to a crime.

But for Pranis, the peacemaking circle has become more than this.

"[The circle] became a way for me to see how humans can live more successfully with each other and the natural world, balancing group and individual needs and gifts," she said. "The circle became a way to move to a kind of world that I want to live in."

Pranis served as the restorative justice planner for the Minnesota Department of Corrections from 1994 to 2003. Since 1998, she has developed and conducted circle trainings in schools, faith communities and neighborhood settings. Her Interfaith Lecture was delivered at 2 p.m. Wednesday in the Hall of Philosophy, speaking to the week's theme of "Crime and Punishment."

"My journey with circles has … been one of unexpected challenges and blessings," Pranis said. "One of the most intriguing, accidental gifts of this journey is the 'driftwood exercise.'?"

The driftwood exercise is the first exercise that Pranis conducts in circle training. The participants are seated in a circle of chairs around a small table and, without talking, they pass around a bag of driftwood. When it is someone's turn, he or she can set a piece of wood on the table, put a piece back into the bag, rearrange the pieces already on the table or leave everything as is.

"If you decide to leave the driftwood as it is … signal nonverbally to the next person that you are passing," Pranis said. "We will continue going around the circle multiple times, manipulating the driftwood, until it comes to a natural ending. We will know we are finished when everyone passes."

There is no stated goal or purpose to the exercise, she said. After the the exercise, the participants verbally debrief on their experiences by passing around a "talking piece," an object that holds meaning for the group and that grants the holder the chance to speak.

"The talking piece ensures that every voice is heard and encourages thoughtful reflection and attentive listening," Pranis said.

The first time she led the exercise, two participants ended up disagreeing on how the driftwood should be arranged. Though Pranis originally intended the exercise to be an "aesthetic opening ceremony" to the rest of the circle training, the participants began to lose their patience.

"When it finally ended and we verbally processed what we had just experienced together, many of the core teachings of the circle process emerged in the participants' reflections," Pranis said. "I had stumbled onto an exercise that brought out core ideas … from the participants before I ever taught the group anything about the process."

Each time she does it, the driftwood exercise forces Pranis to focus on her discomfort about others being frustrated. She has to resist the urge to solve conflict herself and let the group find its own way to a solution.

"Sitting through the discomfort and the moments of panic … have given me a great confidence in the capacity of the group to find its way through thorny places," she said, "if there's a structure that honors each and gives each a turn, a voice."

In the exercise, each participant has gifts to offer to the group, as a well as a unique perspective of what is in the center, Pranis said.

"I saw quickly a metaphor of the pieces of wood as symbolic of ideas," she said. "When you put an idea in the circle, it's no longer yours. Others get to pick it up, move it around, change it - just as they can rearrange the wood in the exercise."

Pranis also learned that when everyone has a voice, the group will not allow any one person to take over. Sometimes when someone is ready for the exercise to be over, he or she will collect all the pieces of wood, put them in the bag and give the bag back to Pranis.

"I noticed that other participants who had been passing and were clearly ready to be done got back in and tried to find the bag," she said. "It seems that even when people want it to be over, they resist it ending by someone taking control."

The exercise teaches that not only should everyone have a voice in the process, but also that it takes time for every voice to be heard. Many participants become impatient during the exercise, but Pranis said there is no shortcut to everyone having a turn.

"We often express a desire for all voices to be heard," she said, "but we rarely allow the time it takes for a full expression of all perspectives. And not just once, but in an iterative process that allows for [people of different] perspectives to be influenced by what they hear from others."

The driftwood exercise is not about the wood itself, she explained. It is about power and relationships. Before trying to resolve the actual conflict in the circle process, the exercise distributes power equally and has people focus on their relationships with one another.

"The use of authority undermines the development of responsibility and self-regulation," Pranis said. "The structure of the circle process shifts responsibility to all participants for the quality of the process and the quality of the decisions or outcomes."

She has consistently found that the most beautiful arrangements of driftwood occur after many of the participants become impatient with the exercise. They become more creative, bringing other objects into the exercise and beginning to expand the workspace beyond the table.

Pranis has learned that there are benefits in not looking for consensus too quickly. When the exercise finishes quickly and peacefully, participants' reflections are less insightful. And when people become impatient or nervous, the exercise becomes an opportunity for them to learn to control their emotions.

Through the exercise, Pranis has discovered that all humans have an innate drive to assign meaning to objects and actions. Conflict often arises from others' misunderstandings about what those meanings are.

"I saw over and over again that some participants would interpret what others were doing in a certain way," she said, "but when that participant explained the meaning of what he or she did, it often did not match the assumption."

The process of assigning meaning to every experience, interaction and feeling, Pranis argued, connects people by allowing them to share with one another.

"Each gets to speak his or her truth into the circle and be listened to with respect," she said. "It is not about right and wrong. In a circle, you get to speak your truth; you just do not get to assume that is the truth for everyone else."

Because of the exercise's dynamics and the fact that it's nonverbal, no participant can assert himself or herself as an independent subject, Pranis explained. Each move is influenced by all the previous moves and by the greater context of the exercise.

"Our innate relational understanding of the universe comes to the forefront," she said. "And that is the source of wisdom, insight and transformative possibility in a circle."

Social distance, Pranis believes, is the main reason for America's destructive and unjust policies. Peacemaking circles break down that social distance by revealing the interconnectedness between individuals.

"What's happening to others will affect us eventually," she said. "Shifting to that mindset is an enormous shift for us in the United States. It means we can never benefit at the expense of others. It means we can't take the easy way out of avoiding conflict or ignoring problems."

The mindset of interconnectedness can also be uplifting, as it shows that everyone belongs in the community, she noted.

"Living as if everyone belongs might be the biggest violence prevention measure we could ever devise," Pranis said. "Everyone belongs in a circle. And the circle is always directed towards healing from the harm of disconnection.

Kay Pranis is a national leader in restorative justice, specializing in peacemaking Circles. She served as the Restorative Justice Planner for the Minnesota Department of Corrections from 1994 to 2003. Before that, she worked six years as the director of research services at the Citizen's Council on Crime and Justice. She has written and presented papers on peacemaking Circles and restorative justice in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan. Since 1998, Kay has conducted Circle trainings in a diverse range of communities-from schools to prisons to workplaces to churches, from rural farm towns in Minnesota to Chicago's South Side.