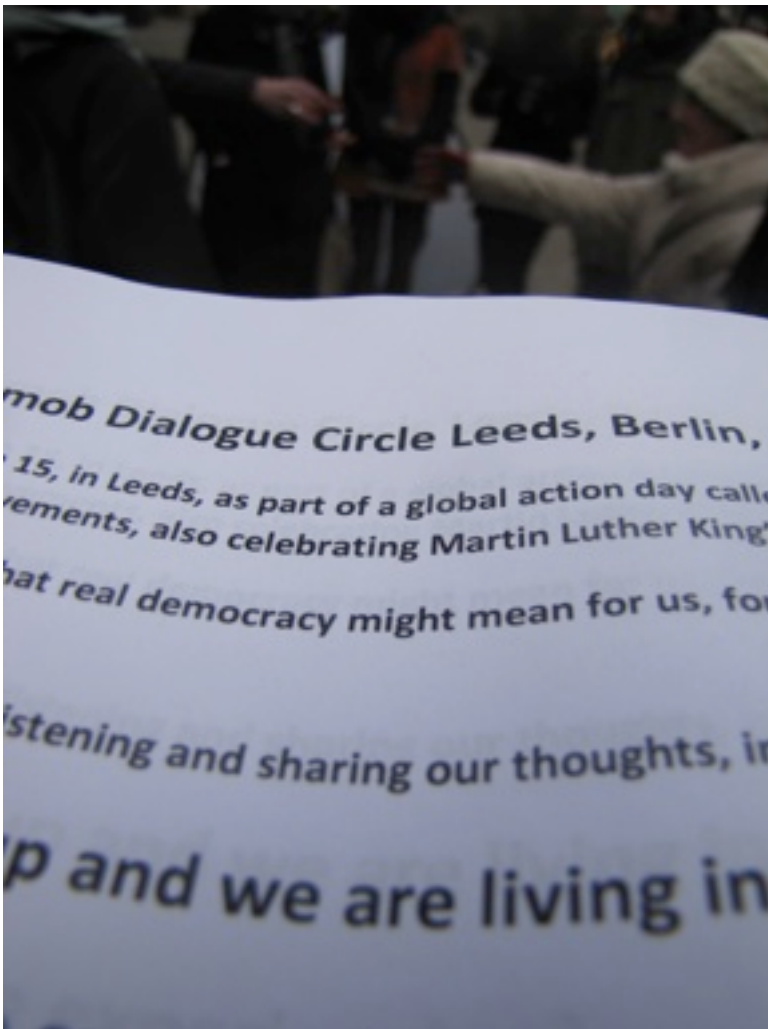


Circle IS real democracy



A cold frosty morning and 3 of us arrived in the middle of the busy town centre right in post Christmas sales season. Frantic shoppers out buying buying and buying. Leeds is a capital shopping centre and even in this time of recession we could see a whole new massive retail outlet being built on the horizon.

A quick cup of coffee and we 3 hosts checked in together - *what was our intention in hosting this simple street circle today on this global day of action for Real Democracy and Occupy?* It was also Martin Luther Kings Birthday, he would have been 97 apparently, so we had our *elder* with us.

We felt nervous at the idea of holding space in an open street space, we didn't know who would come - maybe it would just be us 3? We spoke our intentions, to go with the flow, take care of the opening and closing, guard the circle well and be fully present with our intention of opening space for conversation about our visions and dreams of full democracy.

We set out our circle with a circular harvest sheet and a little orange candle in the centre, and then someone from Occupy Leeds arrived with a pop up tent - and popped it up. More people came and we checked in - *what has moved you to be here today and where are you coming from?* We were from Leeds, Bradford, Newcastle, London, Italy and Spain. We were 12 people, more came and joined us, standing in circle, close enough to hold the space but open enough for other people to simply join us. A busker sang an old Carole King number "you've got a friend" as we opened the space.



We read a poem called 'Maybe', and spoke some quotes from Martin Luther King and remembering his "I have a dream", we passed the talking piece from hand to hand speaking our dreams, visions, desires imagining a better, fairer more democratic world.

Creativity being valued

Greater respect

Opportunities for everyone

People and relationships coming before commodities

Active learning not passive education

Having a say in my education/learning

No power- just a sense of responsibility

Bottom up leadership

More conversations

No more flags or borders

Not profit-driven but people-driven, by love, care and support

Dream....Hope....Change



A couple of us held the space outside the circle, handing out leaflets to people who passed us by, some stopped to look and asked what we were doing. A security guard came by and we thought he was going to move us on - but he simply wanted to know what was up! A copper walked by and didn't even see us. A family out shopping stopped and ended up joining the circle as did two young students, a bit shy at first then stepping in fully to voice how they saw the future. There was an energy and beauty of the young people, and their sadness- how does it look to them, what can we do?



I got into a conversation with a group of young lads, cynical at first and having a laugh but I could feel some sense of them wanting to know more about this, some of them wanted to stay but they felt nervous and moved on. A couple of guys who were living on the street stopped by and joined us for a while.

One of them knelt down and wrote on the circle - please help me and my friend. I think we didn't know what to do about that. One of the participants pointed out to us that we had failed to make space for these two guys to speak their piece because they moved on pretty quick.

If hosting in the street with all its unpredictability, how can circle process keep its integrity and safety of passing the talking piece and still respond to stuff like this? What do we do when we don't know what to do, how to respond?



We talked for an hour, the conversation slowing down and becoming more thoughtful. Both our intention and that of the contributors was so true so we grew a real resonance of acceptance and safety. There was a great quality of listening and an awareness of the need for questions rather than answers. Somehow the circle *was holding* us like a little bubble in this shopping street. We had connected with one another, with ourselves and our intentions to keep hopeful conversations alive. Someone talked about the collapse of the old system and the need to keep moving towards the new system we are birthing right now. One person envisaged the whole of the shopping precinct as a huge open space, lots of circles going on up and down the street, people using the law of two feet to decide where to go or simply when to move on.

We closed with a check out - *what will you take away from this conversation?* Hope, connection, a sense that this little bit of Leeds will never be the same again, that we had reclaimed a piece of the shopping city for ourselves and anyone else who might like to join us. We wondered how we had ended up with politics and politicians we have now and a sense that this circle was REAL democracy in action.

3 claps, one for us, one for Leeds and one for the Planet and we finished. Frantic exchange of telephone numbers, quick conversations about what next and back to the coffee house to warm up again.



Learning and reflections

It is totally possible to host in the street and people walking past are far more curious and ready to engage than we thought they were. In fact they were really interested- delighted almost, that we were there- in Leeds!

The importance of going with the flow – we had some people used to one way of hosting and some people used to another, both can co exist, what matters is that we hold open good spaces and invite conversations about what matters to people.

What you hold in your own heart and in your body and your own presence has the greatest effect on the power of the circle – it is about the process but also about hosting yourself (as always).

Dealing with different street conditions, noise, disturbance etc. means we need more space holders outside the circle.

We got a sense of being connected to all the other street/public space activity that is happening globally. It was great to get out there and do something gentle yet powerful in such hard times for the world.

The format really helped everyone push against the feelings of powerlessness and isolation that are so prevalent, and all the other stuff that gets in the way of us feeling connected, speaking truly from the heart, and thinking creatively, with hope.





Maybe

Maybe our world is not the way they say.

A dance, a chance for you and I to be.

It's time to let your voice into today;

Our own composers weave a melody

A song of no, then yes, then now, then go.

A massed chorus to make the paper
edifice

Shiver and shake that makes an
earthquake so

Certain like the reminder of a final kiss

The curtain lifts and hope retakes the
stage.

So now we know there really is no cage.

*Ruth Steinberg, Lesley Wood and Linda Joy
Mitchell*

