

The Process of Mutual Invitation

Like many of you, Fabian's visit to our class left an impression on me. I was especially taken with his compassionate response to Marie and the wisdom of his advice about how to encourage dialogue with the vulnerable women in her class. *Build trust, maybe let them circle up to feel supported*, etc. It took me back to the days before the pandemic, when we were able to "circle up" in person and feel the palpable energy of a supportive network. I wondered if Marie knew about the Process of Mutual Invitation; a method of engaging in group discussion that helps *alleviate the distraction of anticipation*.

In a typical small group circle, discussion begins by calling on Person 1, then Person 2 and so on, systematically moving around the circle, one person at a time. Unfortunately, in this setting, participants can easily become distracted, silently counting the number of people ahead of them. They are not focused on what is being said. They are not practicing active listening. Rather, they are rehearsing their own script, or perhaps suppressing nausea brought on by a feeling of being cornered to contribute something relevant to the conversation.

The Process of Mutual Invitation is different. It begins, first and foremost, as an *invitation*. Whoever begins the discussion (often a person who has previously consented to being the first to share) speaks, then, instead of turning to the person on her left or right, she randomly selects another person in the circle to whom an invitation is extended. "*Elizabeth, would you like to share with us?*" or "*I'd like to invite Susan to speak next.*" The person selected then responds with "*Oh! Okay. Yes, thank you, Cathy.*" or "*Thank you, Cathy, but I think I'll pass today.*" Knowing that the invitation will be extended each week, classmates feel less pressured to speak if they do not feel they have anything to say that day. The person who passes always has the option to change her mind later. Regardless if they choose to speak or not, each person is validated as a participating member of the circle as they invite the next person to share.

The Process of Mutual Invitation gives the person speaking the same uninterrupted space offered in our breakout groups, when we listen without judging or offering solutions. Those who choose to participate begin to recognize the process as an opportunity to *practice*; a safe space to hear themselves speak and learn how to sort their thoughts into concise statements. Over the course of six or eight weeks or more, mutual trust, personal confidence and community are woven together to create a strong cord—the tie that binds.

Understandably, the Process of Mutual Invitation is not easily accomplished in a virtual format, like Zoom, though it can be done; especially if the entire number of participants can be viewed on one screen, say, ten or fewer.

Whether you find yourself facilitating a small group in person or virtually, consider practicing the Process of Mutual Invitation to experience for yourself the difference in the dynamic of your group discussion. Be consistent in offering the invitation each week. Be patient with yourself and others. Then be a witness to the miracle that unfolds.

Namaste.

~Cathy