

STORY Circles

"To acknowledge our ANCESTORS means we are aware that
WE DID NOT MAKE OURSELVES,
that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps to God; or to Gods.
WE REMEMBER THEM BECAUSE IT IS AN EASY THING TO FORGET:

that we are not the first to **SUFFER,**
REBEL, FIGHT, LOVE, AND DIE.

The grace with which we EMBRACE LIFE, in spite of the PAIN, the SORROW,
is always a measure of what has gone **BEFORE."**

- ALICE WALKER

Her Blue Body Everything We Know, p. 155

HOW DID IT FEEL TO DO THIS EXERCISE?

WHERE AND HOW MIGHT YOU USE STORY CIRCLES IN YOUR OWN WORK OR LIFE?

STORY CIRCLES

[1 - 2 HOURS]

OVERVIEW

Part of our feminist practice is about attribution and lineage. The SONG folks who put this curriculum together learned this activity from John O'Neal, a Black cultural worker and organizer from New Orleans, a lifelong freedom fighter, father of Wendi Moore-O'Neal, and founder of Junebug Productions. Story circles are also a popular education method from the Global South. SONG has used story circles for years, internally and in coalitional gatherings as a tool for connecting with, and listening to, each other deeply. They are also used to find patterns and distinct differences in our experience.

GOALS

- To build relationships
- To introduce popular education, deep listening, and story circles as a key method of work
- To connect our individual selves to legacy and to each other

TIME NEEDED

1 - 2 hours, depending on size of group

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A room with enough space for people to comfortably break out in small groups. You can have flip charts and markers available if you want to scribe themes at the end of the session.
- Optional Handout: **Story Circles** (p. 8)

READINGS/RESOURCES

- *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire
- *Building Clarity and Political Unity* tool (SONG)
- *History Memory Legacy* (SONG)

FRAMING

Begin by sharing this quote from Alice Walker:

"To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps to God; or to Gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget: that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love, and die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrow, is always a measure of what has gone before."

-Alice Walker *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*, p. 155

PREPARATION

Break people out into small circles of four or five sitting and facing each other. Then share the following instructions:

- Introduce purpose, goals, and background of Story Circles.
- **Say:** I will share a prompt with you, and each person in your small group will have a chance to respond to it.
- Our intention is active listening as each member of our group shares a story with us, not formulating responses as people speak. Please do not interrupt anyone else.
- Use open body language: arms uncrossed, phones down, etc.
- Respect multilingual spaces by honoring the languages people use.
- We are working towards holding anti-oppressive space.
- We will have 5 minutes for everyone to think quietly before starting. Please do so without note-taking.
- Time is kept by one member of each group, so everyone knows when it's time to move on to the next story.
- Each person will have 3 minutes to respond to the prompt. If they do not use their time, you can sit in silence as a group.
- Once all the stories have been shared, groups will have time for small group discussion. Then we will do large group discussion.

Choose one of the following prompts:

- *What stories do we know about how our ancestors and elders survived hard times?*
- *Who is a feminist ancestor you claim and why?*
- *What's one thing you learned from your ancestors or elders on how to get by?*
- *Who and what do you carry with you 'in your joints' (Cherrie Moraga)?*
- *When did you realize all was not right with the world?*

Small group reflection time:

- After everyone has had their turn to speak, ask the small groups to reflect on highlights of the stories they heard and the things that resonated. As the facilitator, you should remind people that resonating is not about adding your opinion of someone else's story but rather sharing what moved you.
- People can ask each other for more information, not to challenge what is being shared but to learn.

Full group reflection time:

- *Were there any recurring themes or commonalities among your stories?*
- *Were there differences or complexities that stood out?*
- Pull out systematic and institutional themes to the stories.
- You can scribe themes out on a big piece of paper if desired.

POPULAR EDUCATION

If you choose, distribute the handout (p. 8) of Alice Walker's words and space for people to take notes from this discussion. Lay out the practice of popular education as a strategy for creating collective analysis and taking action.

- Story Circles are **just one example** of popular education.
- Popular education helps us **gather information** from the experts. **People are experts in their own lives.**
- We use popular education to **connect individual stories to collective experiences.**
- It also helps us draw out **themes and patterns** (of both difference and commonality) among our experiences.
- We use popular education to **build shared analysis** that allows for complexity.
- We can then connect our analysis to **systems of power**, and make plans to challenge them.
- In popular education, we **hear from many voices** and get to work on **being present with one another.**
- We also use popular education to train our bodies to **take bold action together.**

Invite participants to pair up and talk about how they felt doing this exercise (or to journal silently). Where and how might they use Story Circles in their own work or life? Remind people that their life includes social and communal spaces, not just political work!