

# Contemplative Writing Circles

*listening for emergent life in writer and the writing*  
by Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew



# Welcome!



We writers so desperately need colleagues to thrive! And if we write in part for the sake of personal discovery, we also need others' spiritual support.

This model for a writing community tends aliveness on the page *and* within the writer. Much as I believe in the power of the written word and much as I'm dedicated to supporting the development of effective literature, I'm increasingly convinced that the most significant creation born of writing is who we become for having written. Here is a process to nurture that subtle, often private inner transformation--in community.

*Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew*

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# Description

The most significant creation born of writing is the person the writer becomes for having written. With intention, community can tend both the literary creation as well as what is coming alive inside the creators. This facilitated small group model is inspired by spiritual direction groups and Quaker clearness committees. The circle magnifies our listening and holds us accountable to our creative source. Unlike traditional writing groups which focus exclusively on the text, this model helps participants attend the aliveness stirring within both writer and text. Writers create our best work when our inner transformation receives others' support.

This model works best with those who:

- write regularly
- are committed to their writing
- are ready to share their work with others
- value contemplative practice and are willing to grow as listeners
- understand writing as a spiritual practice and seek community support for this practice

In the traditional writing workshop, a piece is presented for others' eyes to help the writer "re-see" or revise. In this model, the writer's self is presented, as well as the writing. The group becomes a mirror for what is emerging in and what might yet be possible for both writer and writing.

For this reason, this model does not make space for feedback or critique of manuscripts. Writers solely looking to improve their craft or develop a project are better served by a traditional writing group.

# Introduction to Contemplative Dialogue

Contemplative dialogue is a group conversation practice of listening from and with the heart. By hearing, accepting, and reflecting back another's words, we are present to one another. The pace of conversation is slow. Silence is an active participant. We are challenged to show up fully, listening without concern for how we might respond. Freed from the obligation to react, we can offer our observations and open-ended questions in ways that widen possibility for the entire group.

Some principles:

1. Listen first, refraining from thinking about how you might respond. Listen with acceptance, with no need to challenge, critique, or react.
2. Practice listening from the heart, in a spirit of love. Attend to what is coming alive and awake, in both the writer and the writing.
3. Before speaking, pause. Be deliberate.
4. Ask open-ended, non-directive questions. Mirror back what you've seen, heard, or felt.
5. Avoid cross-talking.
6. Expect periods of silence. Learn to be comfortable with the silence and resist the urge to speak just because there is silence.
7. Trust the group. Note how the participants' reflections come together to form a collective mind.

# Format

Monthly in-person gatherings of 2 hours hosted by a facilitator are ideal. As the group grows comfortable with contemplative dialogue, the transition online, to 1.5 hours, or to shared leadership becomes easier. I've found this model works best with groups of 5-8 participants. Attendance is critical.

- Opening—a brief meditation or poem followed by a period of silence.
- Check-in—participants share up to 5 minutes about their creative life, including a short reading if they choose.
- Longer sharing
  - One or two presenters share what's transpiring at the intersection of their creative and inner lives.
  - The total time for each person's "turn" is usually between 30-45 minutes. While the group is still forming, I recommend that the facilitator reserves 15 minutes of each presenter's time for contemplative dialogue.
  - See below for what the presenter might share and with what intention.
  - Contemplative dialogue may feel strange because it's not necessarily a conversation. It works best if it's spacious, with room to attend to the Spirit's (or, if you prefer, the Muse's) movement. Silences between offerings is ideal.
  - The presenter can choose whether or not to answer questions. Remember, the point isn't a conversation or satisfying anyone's curiosity; the point is to support the writer's ongoing exploration.

# Format, cont.

- Monthly in-person gatherings of 2 hours hosted by a facilitator are ideal. The facilitator will periodically intervene as part of teaching contemplative process to the group. It's extremely difficult to ask open-ended questions, to mirror back without judgment, and to avoid making suggestions. It's a skill rarely learned or practiced in our culture. We all make mistakes; we're all learning, including the facilitator. Don't take the facilitator's interventions personally.
- The writer can request that someone take notes for them. This can allow the writer to consider the group's questions beyond the bounds of the gathering.
- We honor the confidentiality of the circle by not discussing with others what transpired there and not sharing with others any writing from the circle.
- Announcements, including date, time, and presenters for the next meeting.
- Closing—a brief meditation, poem, or silence.

# Preparing to Share in the Writer's Circle

When it's your turn to share, please prepare ahead of time by asking yourself, "What is most on my heart as a writer today?" Some possible topics include:

- A struggle from your writing life—about process, craft, ethics, self-confidence, discipline, time, content, etc. If you find yourself stuck in any arena, this is good material to bring to the circle.
- A joy or discovery from your writing that you want to more fully integrate.
- A topic you're writing about and want help brainstorming or thinking about more deeply. For instance, if you're asking a question in an essay or memoir or poem, you could pose this question to the group. Or if you're developing a character, you might share that character's personality; the group could then ask questions about how the character might respond to different situations to help you get to know the character better.
- A dimension of your identity or role as a writer. What about being a writer or claiming this identity or work do you struggle with? What role does sharing writing with other or publishing your writing play in your spiritual journey?
- A discernment question. Perhaps you need to make an important decision in your writing; you can describe the circumstances and your options. For instance, you could use the group to help you discern possible structures for a book, whether or not to pursue publication, or if you should pursue a scary topic.

# *Preparing to Share in the Writers' Circle, cont.*

You may also read aloud a writing sample that illustrates what's most on your heart today or is an example of what you're currently working on. This gives the writing itself a voice in the circle. Note that others will not critique your writing or offer you feedback. Because of this, feel free to share work in progress even if it is very rough. You may bring copies for others if you wish but that's not necessary.

While I generally recommend reading no more than 500 words, I've been in circles where what a writer most needed was for others to hear her work—without judgment or comment. Consider your intentions regarding what to share from your life and writing. What do you most need now? What gifts might this circle offer you that other conditions can't or don't provide?

# Preparing to Listen in the Writers' Circle

The job of the other participants is to listen with open hearts. As you listen, ask yourself, “What’s coming alive—both for the writer and for his/her written work? Where do I see energy here?”

When you respond, be lean of expression and speak from the heart. You might:

- Ask open-ended, non-leading, genuine questions. I think of such questions as gateways into possibility rather than as questions seeking answers. Consider them gifts for the speaker, not for yourself. Please avoid leading questions, yes/no questions, and questions meant to satisfy your own curiosity.
- Reflect back what you’ve heard from the presenter, especially where you recognized the writer or the writer’s work coming alive. Reflect back what you’ve seen or felt from the presenter.
- Sit in silence, holding what you’ve heard in love.

We’re not here to problem-solve so much as offer observations and questions to help the author explore what’s most coming alive in their creative process. When the writer reads work, listen for what is coming alive there, how their work is speaking to them, how they are in dialogue with the work, and what the work might be asking of them or the world. Practice being responsive, not reactive.

It might seem like the writer is in the hot seat, but actually the listeners do the bulk of the work. Open-hearted listening is a difficult practice. Because of this, listening is often just as (if not more) rewarding than sharing.

# Preparing to Listen in the Writer's Circle, cont.

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# The Facilitator's Work

The facilitator's job is to hold the space, keep the time, teach and monitor the contemplative process, and protect the silence.

## Holding the Space, Keeping Time:

- Create a conducive setting. In person, this might mean a circle of comfortable chairs, a center altar with candle and beautiful objects, tea and snacks. Online, this might mean a beautiful background or using video or music.
- Be hospitable. Welcome participants as they arrive. Instigate conversations to avoid the awkwardness of a new group gathering. Begin and end on time. Include a stretch/bathroom break.
- Be a leader. Step up when the group process veers away from its purpose. Heed the time and intervene when necessary.

## Building Trust:

- The first few gatherings will need time dedicated to getting to know one another and familiarizing the group with the contemplative process. Some ideas:
- Have everyone bring a short (250 word?) writing sample to the first gathering. After an initial introduction (name, where you live, what you write, and what your writing practice is like) and an introduction to contemplative dialogue, do a second round where participants bring their writing voice into the circle.
- Ask an ice-breaker question related to their writing process (see resources).

# *The Facilitator's Work, cont.*

- Especially online, give plenty of time to building trust and connection between participants before formally beginning contemplative dialogue. Perhaps invite people to arrive on zoom early or stay late to visit with each other.
- In person, break for tea/bathroom. Make space for visiting before and afterward.

## Teaching and Monitoring the Contemplative Process:

- Especially at first, teaching the contemplative dialogue process is your primary job. Yes, the group is focused on supporting one another, but they can't fully succeed until they've learned and practiced this process. In addition to the introductory materials, you'll need to teach on the fly, intervening in the dialogue to ask listeners to reframe questions, protecting the silence rigorously, and modeling appropriate responses.
- For the first few weeks, practice contemplative dialogue using yourself as the writer or by having participants share less personal material. For example, you might ask for volunteers to share their process for cooking a meal or doing the laundry, then use contemplative dialogue in response.
- During practice and even once participants begin sharing, call attention to effective questions and constructive mirroring as positive reinforcement. Don't be afraid to interrupt the dialogue to point out what's working in the process.

# The Facilitator's Work, cont.

- Don't hesitate to intervene when a participant isn't using contemplative dialogue. The harm done is magnified if it isn't stopped. Also, the sooner and more frequently you interject upfront, the less personal your comments will seem to participants. The best way to learn this process is by doing it.

## *Some techniques for intervening:*

- Invite the listener to reframe a comment as a question.
- Invite the listener to reframe yes/no questions and leading questions into open-ended questions.
- If someone makes a craft suggestion, help them explore their motivation. What do they hope to satisfy in themselves with this suggestion? Then explore what response might instead open possibility for the writer.
- Invite the listener to share more about what they saw or heard that prompted their comment. Often these observations are enough.
- Remind the group that their first task is to learn contemplative process. Use phrases like: "I challenge you..." or "I invite you..." when you sense the process could go deeper.
- Debrief afterward. Where was the listening especially fruitful?
- Groups have a propensity to default to ordinary conversation. While conversation is beautiful in its own right, contemplative dialogue offers rare gifts. When we protect contemplative dialogue, we're not denigrating our usual back-and-forth banter; we're expanding what's possible for us in community. Feel free to remind folks to slow down, to sit with the silence.

# The Facilitator's Work, cont.

## Protecting Silence

- Silence is key. Silence is where mystery resides. Without silence, deep listening is impossible. The more openings for silence you can create, the better.
- Beginning and ending the gathering with silence shows participants its centrality in this work.
- Remind the group that silence is valid response to someone's offering.
- Invite participants to slow their contributions down.
  - Use a talking stick or rock. This creates a built-in pause between speakers.
  - Suggest taking three deep breaths after one person finishes speaking before contributing.
  - Ring a chime if conversation gets going as a reminder to slow down.
  - Build trust between participants and the silence. Point out how silence invites us to attend to our other senses. Observe when the silence has been particularly warm or rich. Model comfort with silence.
  - Note that silence can be especially hard to read online and early in a group's formation. Check in with someone who's sharing has been followed by silence: "How was that silence for you? What was happening?"

# The Facilitator's Work, cont.

## To Consider:

- What will you do if someone reads for their entire time and gets no silence or dialogue in response?
- What will you do if someone reads triggering material?
- What will you do if a participant's comments are hurtful or disruptive?

## Observations:

- The social time before and after the gathering is important to building relationships.
- Food and warm drinks also encourage human connection and help care for our bodies.
- One group recommends adding “writing cafés”, initiated by anyone, any time between writing circle meetings. These are set times when participants check in by email, share their intention for the writing time, light a candle, write, and then check in with a video chat at the end of the designated time.
- Well-established groups are able to rotate the facilitator role.

# Resources

## Reflections for Initial Gatherings:

As a group forms, I often spend some time setting the stage by sharing personal stories and the values I bring to this model.

- I share my personal experiences of writing communities and what led me to desire a group like this.
- I reflect on and lead discussion around the significance of community for writers:
  - We spend so much time alone! We need companionship.
  - It's important to share ideas, learn about new opportunities.
  - Hearing others' experiences helps us recognize shared patterns in the writing process.
  - Being in community moves us out of a scarcity mindset. We're in this together.
- I reflect on my experiences with contemplation and contemplative dialogue:
  - How important it's been to be known as a creator.
  - How others magnify our listening.
  - Writing is a form of listening—listening to the inner voice, listening to the emergent story, listening to the needs of the reader, listening to conversations of our broader culture. It's a creative act in that something is made from the listening.
  - Silence is trustworthy. Presence of mystery.
  - Writing is generative and receptive—co-creative with Mystery.

# Resources, cont.

- Our literary culture emphasizes the creation of art, the thing, the product. We can easily access classes and writing groups where we learn the craft. Often these places disregard the creator in their focus on the creation. But creative work without the creator's deep engagement is disingenuous. To make effective literature, we need emotionally, spiritually mature writers. We need to grow up. We need to honor who we're becoming in and through the writing process.
- Writing groups for the most part focus on the generative part of writing—what we can determine by means of our will, our skill, our commitment, our practice, our craft. We've all gotten a lot of that. This doesn't mean we don't need more. It's just readily available.
- Support for our receptivity in writing isn't readily available. Nor do many of us have these skills.
- When we learn to listen deeply to one another, we can apply that skill to other forms of listening, like to our writing.
- Spiritual direction groups, Circles of Trust, and Quaker clearness committees use listening and attention as a tool for transformation.
  - "Conversation as a hermeneutical enterprise helps persons bring their own meanings to expression. With sensitive, active listening we "hear out of" each other things we needed to bring to word but could not, and would not, without an other. This is Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship with its dialogical transcendence." --James Fowler, Stages of Faith
  - We "hear one another into speech," as Nelle Morton writes.
  - "Attention becomes a tool of transformation in its capacity to transcend time by so deeply entering the present." --Kathleen Dowling Singh

# Writing Principles Undergirding this Model

- A writer is one who writes. This group is comprised of writers. Writing is valuable in and of itself.
- Listening is an important dimension of the writing life. This circle expands the range of our listening by welcoming others into our artistic lives.
- We are present to one another as writers by being open, honest, and authentic. We share our creative work as an example of our personal exploration, and we share our inner exploration in service of our creative work.
- Our creative work has a voice and life all its own. Our writing is of us and separate from us. Both are worthy of our attention.
- We support one another through genuine curiosity, deep respect, and unwavering encouragement. Together we create a safe environment. We do this by mirroring back what we've heard and witnessed, by asking real questions, and by avoiding "fixing," reacting, or any modality that shuts down possibility.
- Everyone's voice gets heard, and every contribution is worthy. At least once every evening everyone has an opportunity to contribute, either with check-in or in answer to an open-ended question. Each participant is responsible for monitoring themselves, being present to the conversation, sharing generously, and being lean of speech.
- The richest conversations happen with both structure and open-endedness. A facilitator/time keeper holds the evening by opening and closing the gathering on time, helping the group across transitions, monitoring the time, and intervening when participants step outside of the group's agreed upon structure. That said, all participants are also responsible for the group dynamics and should support the facilitator in this work.

# Readings for Discussion during first gatherings

Brenda Ueland's

"Tell Me More: On the Fine Art of Listening"

Note that this is a bit dated (and demeaning) in its stereotypes about men and women, but Ueland's essay works well to turn participants' attention to different ways of listening.

Nelle Morton—

"Beloved Image," The Journey is Home

It was in a small group of women who had come together to tell our own stories that I first received a totally new understanding of hearing and speaking. I remember well how one woman started, hesitating and awkward, trying to put the pieces of her life together. Finally she said: "I hurt... I hurt all over." She touched herself in various places as if feeling for the hurt before she added, "but... I don't know where to begin to cry." She talked on and on. Her story took on fantastic coherence. When she reached a point of most excruciating pain no one moved. No one interrupted. Finally she finished. After a silence, she looked from one woman to another. "You heard me. You heard me all the way." Her eyes narrowed. She looked directly at each woman in turn and then said slowly: "I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story." I filed this experience away as something unique. (cont on next page)

# Readings, cont.

But it happened again and again in other such small groups of women. It happened to me. Then, I knew I had been experiencing something I had never experienced before. A complete reversal of the going logic in which someone speaks precisely so that more accurate hearing may take place. This woman was saying, and I had experienced, a depth hearing that takes place before the speaking – a hearing that is far more than acute listening. A hearing engaged in by the whole body that evokes speech – a new speech—a new creation. The woman had been heard to her own speech.

While I experienced this kind of hearing through women, I am convinced it is one of those essential dimensions of the full human experience long programmed out of our culture and our religious tradition. In time I came to understand the wider implication of this reversal as revolutionary and profoundly theological. Hearing of this sort is equivalent to empowerment. We empower one another by hearing the other to speech. We empower the disinherited, the outsider, as we are able to hear them name in their own way their own oppression and suffering. In turn, we are empowered as we can put ourselves in a position to be heard by the disinherited (in this case other women) to speaking our own feeling of being caught and trapped. Hearing in this sense can break through political and social structures and image a new system. A great ear at the heart of the universe –at the heart of our common life—hearing human beings to speech—to our own speech.

Since this kind of hearing first came to me, I have tried to analyze the process, but it resists analysis and explanation. It traffics in another and different logic. It appears to belong in woman experience, and I have found it in some poetry and some Eastern religions. The Pentecost story reverses the going logic and puts hearing before speaking as the work of the spirit. (cont)

# Readings, cont.

There is no doubt that when a group of women hear another woman to speech, a presence is experienced in the new speech. One woman described the “going down” as non-speaking—or speaking that is a lie. Even though she used the common vernacular she said she used it in the clichéd manner of her conditioning. It was the language of the patriarchal culture—alien to her own nature. “Coming up,” she explained, “I had no words. I paused. I stuttered. I could find no word in the English language that could express my emotion. But I had to speak. Old words came out with a different meaning. I *felt* words I could not express, but I was on the way to speaking—or the speaking was speaking me. I know that sounds weird.” While all liberation movements may be expected to rise with a new language on their lips, I have been particularly conscious of the new woman speech. Perhaps because it portends such vast changes of both a personal and political nature. It is as if the patriarchal structures had been called into question and the powerful old maleness in deity had been superseded by the new reality coming audible in woman speech.

## Discussion:

What passages spoke to you?

What have you observed about listening?

- Does how you listen affect what the other person says?
- Does it affect the nature of the exchange?

We amplify what we give our attention.

- What happens when you pay attention to yourself—what will make you look good, how the speaker impacted you, what you’re going to say in response?
- What happens when you give full attention to the speaker?
- Spiritual direction, groups, use listening and attention as a tool for transformation.

# Openings

Create a sacred container to remind participants of your central purpose. (5 min)

Since deepening our connection with the creative wellspring is our primary purpose, begin and end group meetings with a few minutes to center or focus. I recommend using a simple, non-religious visual focus at the center of the room—a candle and cloth are plenty, but feel free to add whatever you like. You can read a poem, lead a meditation, play quiet music, or invite the group to collect themselves in a moment of silence. Feel free to use a chime.

***Here are a few examples I've used to open classes:***

- I reflected briefly on the origins of the word “inspiration” and invited people to breathe silently for a bit, breathing in new ideas, breathing out new creation.
- We did silent meditation in response to Zora Neale Hurston: “Janie didn’t read, so she didn’t know she was the universe and everything boiled down to a single drop.”
- This untitled poem from Julia Alvarez:

*Sometimes the words are so close I am  
more who I am when I'm down on paper  
than anywhere else as if my life were  
practicing for the real me I become  
unbuttoned from the anecdotal and  
unnecessary and undressed down  
to the figure of the poem, line by line,  
the real text a child could understand.  
Why do I get confused living it through?  
Those of you, lost and yearning to be free,  
who hear these words, take heart from me.  
I once was in as many drafts as you.  
But briefly, essentially, here I am...  
Who touches this poem touches a woman.*

# Openings, cont.

- “To the Words” from W. S. Merwin:

*When it happens you are not there  
O you beyond numbers  
beyond recollection  
passed on from breath to breath  
given again  
from day to day from age  
to age  
charged with knowledge  
knowing nothing  
indifferent elders  
indispensable and sleepless  
keepers of our names  
before ever we came  
to be called by them  
you that were  
formed to begin with  
you that were cried out  
you that were spoken  
to begin with  
to say what could not be said  
ancient precious  
and helpless ones  
say it*

# Openings, cont.

- One established group has written their statement of intention to read at each gathering. Here is a version written by Lisa Kee:

In this free, protected space

We practice deep listening

We focus on what is coming alive in the writer and the writing.

We trust that this practice compels us into diverse creation and deep inner knowing.

We trust and learn from silence and each other.

When I asked an established group what they practice when they gather, they offered the following reflections. I like to share these with new groups as they're forming.

- Make the writer's life and the story's life central.
- Practice wanting the best for the writer.
- When you're the note-taker, you get a chance to learn from others how to ask questions.
- Learn not to answer the questions you're asked; just hear them and sit with them.
- Practice loving.
- Sometimes the nuggets readers come away with are more important than the whole.
- I put my attention toward, "What's coming alive? What wants to come alive?" What is within us? What does it want? What shape? Where's the energy? The spark? Note it; that's the place of curiosity.
- Listening without criticism—it's like manure on a garden.
- Put self aside; reflect like a mirror.
- Practice not fixing or changing one another. Companioning.

# Check-In

Check-in is an opportunity for group participants to bring their full lives (and not just their writing selves) to the circle. Everyone uses their voice in check-in, which is a good way to start a meeting.

- Where are you in your creative life? Check-in might include details from your personal life inasmuch as they affect your writing.
- You can use this as an opportunity to make a commitment or ask the group to hold you accountable.
- You can read a very brief excerpt as part of your check-in.
- Those presenting will forego check-in to save time.
- Check-in should be limited to 5 minutes.

The danger with check-in is that the structure deteriorates into conversation or therapy or monologues. To help prevent this, facilitators should:

1. Give clear instructions upfront. Everyone in the group has five minutes to share. When someone else is speaking, your job is to listen deeply and hold what they're saying in your heart. There's no opportunity to respond to check-ins.
2. Invite the group to reflect on what they'll check in about ahead of time.
3. Remind the group of the importance of showing up—of bringing their full selves to the group—as well as respecting the group's purpose. Check-in is not a time for problem-solving or conversation.
4. Model brief and forthright check-ins, especially at first.
5. Watch the time. Interject when someone talks too much. Invite reticent participants to share more.

If you find that your group's check-in falls flat or is out of control, try using some focus question—for instance, "What has come alive in your writing life these past weeks?"

Check-in is also the time to take care of housekeeping details, such as who will share writing when.

# *Ice-Breaker Exercises*

When has a moment during writing caused an awakening in your spiritual life? Or when has an awakening in your spiritual life caused a transformation in your writing?

Share “one true sentence” from your writing this past month.

Have everyone share one struggle, surprise, or victory from the past month.

# Closings

Here are a few examples of very short reflections I've used to close classes:

- “And why should you do all these things? Why should we all use our creative power and write or paint or play music, or whatever it tells us to do? Because there is nothing that makes people so generous, joyful, lively, bold and compassionate, so indifferent to fighting and the accumulation of objects and money. Because the best way to know the Truth or Beauty is to try to express it. And what is the purpose of existence Here or Yonder but to discover truth and beauty and express it, i.e., share it with others? --Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write*
- Invite the group to call to mind some image that has revealed itself in their writing and simply hold it a minute in their hearts.
- Usually I stay on the look-out for some significant insight that has emerged, inviting the group to sit with it for a second.
- Go around the circle and have everyone give a one-word response to a question such as “What are you taking away today?” or “What is one gift you’ve received?”

# Handout for Participants

## Preparing to Share in the Writers' Circle

When it's your turn to share, please prepare ahead of time by asking yourself, "What is most on my heart as a writer today?" Some possible topics include:

- A struggle from your writing life—about process, craft, ethics, self-confidence, discipline, time, content, etc. If you find yourself stuck in any arena, this is good material to bring to the circle.
- A joy or discovery from your writing that you want to more fully integrate.
- A topic you're writing about and want help brainstorming or thinking about more deeply. For instance, if you're asking a question in an essay or memoir or poem, you could pose this question to the group. Or if you're developing a character, you might share that character's personality; the group could then ask questions about how the character might respond to different situations to help you get to know the character better.
- A dimension of your identity or role as a writer. What about being a writer or claiming this identity or work do you struggle with? What role does sharing writing with other or publishing your writing play in your spiritual journey?
- A discernment question. Perhaps you need to make an important decision in your writing; you can describe the circumstances and your options. For instance, you could use the group to help you discern possible structures for a book, whether or not to pursue publication, or if you should pursue a scary topic.

## Preparing to Share in the Writers' Circle, cont.

You may also read aloud a writing sample that illustrates what's most on your heart today or is an example of what you're currently working on. This gives the writing itself a voice in the circle. Note that others will not critique your writing or offer you feedback. Because of this, feel free to share work in progress even if it is very rough. You may bring copies for others if you wish but that's not necessary.

While I generally recommend reading no more than 500 words, I've been in circles where what a writer most needed was for others to hear her work—without judgment or comment. Consider your intentions regarding what to share from your life and writing. What do you most need now? What gifts might this circle offer you that other conditions can't or don't provide?

## Preparing to Listen in the Writers' Circle, cont.

The job of the other participants is to listen with open hearts. As you listen, ask yourself, “What’s coming alive—both for the writer and for his/her written work? Where do I see energy here?”

When you respond, be lean of expression and speak from the heart.

You might:

- Ask open-ended, non-leading, genuine questions. I think of such questions as gateways into possibility rather than as questions seeking answers. Consider them gifts for the speaker, not for yourself. Please avoid leading questions, yes/no questions, and questions meant to satisfy your own curiosity.
- Reflect back what you’ve heard from the presenter, especially where you recognized the writer or the writer’s work coming alive. Reflect back what you’ve seen or felt from the presenter.
- Sit in silence, holding what you’ve heard in love.

We’re not here to problem-solve so much as offer observations and questions to help the author explore what’s most coming alive in their creative process. When the writer reads work, listen for what is coming alive there, how their work is speaking to them, how they are in dialogue with the work, and what the work might be asking of them or the world. Practice being responsive, not reactive.

It might seem like the writer is in the hot seat, but actually the listeners do the bulk of the work. Open-hearted listening is a difficult practice. Because of this, listening is often just as (if not more) rewarding than sharing.

# Thank you!



Do reach out if you have questions.

I'd also love to hear how you make this  
format your own.

Blessings on your work!

*Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew*