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Listening from the Heart: The Experience of Compassionate Listening in Teen Talking Circle

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LISTENING FROM THE HEART: THE EXPERIENCE OF COMPASSIONATE LISTENING IN

TEEN TALKING CIRCLES

by

CARLA WILSON

Under the Direction of Amira Jarmakani

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of former teen talking circle participant's experience with the practice of compassionate listening in talking circles and to explore compassionate listening as a form of spiritual activism. This study explored the use and effect of compassionate listening within the facilitator training materials developed and used by the organization Teen Talking Circles as well as the use and experience of compassionate listening within the teen talking circles. For the purpose of this study, I interviewed seven former female teen talking circle participants.

Open ended semi-structured interviews were the means of data collection. Data were analyzed thematically and after reviewing the transcripts from all seven interviews, the five strongest themes to come out of the interviews were: increased communication skills, increased awareness, less judgment of self and others, deeper relationships and an increased sense of empathy.

INDEX WORDS: Compassion, Compassionate listening, Spiritual activism, Womanism, Teen talking circles, Social change

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CARLA WILSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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TEEN TALKING CIRCLES

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the Teen Talking Circle organization for the important work they do with teens to create positive change through the practice of compassionate listening. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to Linda Wolf, co-founder of Teen Talking Circles, for her trust in me and her support of this study all along the way. I also dedicate this thesis to the former talking circle participants who so graciously gave of their time, shared their personal stories and inspired me to continue exploring the effects of the practice of compassionate listening in the world.

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It took a community to produce this thesis and I would like to acknowledge those in my community that have provided support in their own unique way. My familial community begins with my immediate family. My parents Junanne Peck and Samuel Barrett believed in me from the very beginning and often when I did not believe in myself. They supported me on an emotional and at times financial level which allowed me to concentrate on the work to be done. My son Richard Rangel and daughter Sheyane Rangel were a support in that they have always been a catalyst in my journey to continue higher education throughout my life. Quite often they have had to sacrifice time with me in lieu of my studies and to this I am extremely grateful. Their understanding has been a gift.

I am also grateful to my academic community. I appreciate the endless patience and direction of Dr. Jarmakani throughout the thesis process. Her ability to keep me focused has helped me immeasurably. I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Maparyan who through her own work in womanism and spiritual activism has been and continues to be an inspiration to me in my personal and academic life. Without her initial belief in my research and her continuous support of my educational goals, I would not be where I am today. I am also extremely appreciative of the support and endless editing provided by Dr. Black throughout my master's program. She was always available all the while completing her doctoral degree. I am endlessly grateful to Dr. Passman for serving on my committee all the way from the University of Maine and offering much needed support and encouragement throughout the thesis process. I would also like to acknowledge the work of Gloria Anzaldúa as her life and work have been and continue to be influential in my life and work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The history of my interest in the empowerment of teen girls and my relationship with the Teen Talking Circles (TTC) organization will highlight why I am passionate about this research. I became a mother at the age of 16. Being pregnant at 15 led to a sense of isolation in my life. Although I was looking forward to becoming a mother, I was living a different life than my peers and ultimately that sense of difference led to me leaving high school to focus on my family. In my early twenties, I came across a book called *Daughters of the Moon Sisters of the Sun: Young Women and Mentors on the Transition to Womanhood* (1997) by K. Wind Hughes & Linda Wolf. Hughes shared her story of becoming a teenage mother at fifteen. She described how everyone stared at her like she was a deviant person, including the medical staff at the hospital. However, instead of being ashamed, embarrassed, and afraid, she was excited and actually proud. She was looking forward to being the best mother she could be as was I when I found out I was pregnant at fifteen. Hughes claims:

> I was fifteen years old and beside myself with the joy and wonder of giving birth and becoming a parent. People often stared or gasped when they heard my age. You should have seen the nurses at the hospital calling each other into the room to see the "young mom." Actually, they were rather rude. There's a social stigma to being a teen parent, a shaming. (p. 128)

Her story moved me beyond words; finding someone that I could relate to made me feel less alone, less embarrassed, less abnormal and deviant. I immediately began an email correspondence with Hughes to express how her essay affected me. The connection I felt with this author and respect I had for the work that was taking place within this organization continues to be a strong one. I have continuously stayed in contact with the organization since 1996. When I made the decision to apply to graduate school, I immediately began thinking of TTC and ways I might include them and the work they do with teen girls in my research. Once I began my graduate work in the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Institute

at Georgia State University, my vision slowly began to crystalize. I saw an opportunity to combine my passion for both the empowerment of teen girls and working with TTC in my research.

Wind Hughes and Linda Wolf founded The Daughters Sister Project in 1993 as a way to help their daughters and other teen girls navigate the teen years. Although they started with girl's circles, the Daughters-Sisters Project grew into a larger organization called Teen Talking Circles (TTC). Currently, the movement includes teen circles for young men (Brothers Sons Project), and mixed gender circles (GenderTalks) and facilitator trainings, workshops and retreats for adults and families. TTC was built on the principle that a mature self-identity and healthy relationships develop naturally when individuals learn to speak and hear the truth of others with their hearts.

Since TTC's inception, they have offered weekly talking circles for middle and high school-aged youth. The circles occur after school once per week for the entire academic year. More than 75% of their circles are Girl's Talking Circles led by adult women facilitators. In circle, young people learn to use a variety of skills including conflict resolution, stress reduction, deep listening, and physical movement practices. TTC's focus is fostering *wholeness* and *inclusivity* rather than *exclusivity*:

> By providing young people with a safe space to tell the truth, talking circles encourage teens to reveal their passion, beauty, and dreams, as well as their fears, problems, and insecurities. In circle, young women and men bear witness to each other as full human beings, discover the wholeness in themselves, and learn to relate inclusively rather than exclusively. By modeling wholeness, compassion, and inclusiveness, talking circles help young people develop mature identities and form healthy relationships at home, at work, and in society, providing a foundation for a more cooperative, caring world. ("Teen Talking Circles," para. 4)

Teens learn the practice of compassionate listening in the talking circles. TTC co-founder, Linda Wolf, is a trained compassionate listening facilitator at The Compassionate Listening Project (TCLP). Wolf customized TCLP's method for training and practicing compassionate listening for use within the TTC organization.

Research Questions

In this study, I wanted to investigate the experiences and perspectives of former teen talking circle participants. The guiding research questions for this study were:

1) Does compassionate listening provide tools for young women navigating their teen years?

2) How did former teen talking circle participants perceive and interpret their circle experience?

3) How do former teen talking circle participants perceive compassionate listening in relation to social change?

4) How do former teen talking circle participants perceive compassionate listening in relation to spiritual activism?

5) How do former teen talking circle participants perceive the relationship between spiritual activism and social change?

Once I attended the facilitator workshop, completed the interviews with the former teen talking circle participants and analyzed the data, I observed that my conclusions went beyond my initial research questions. At the workshop, I personally discovered that the practice of compassionate listening involves self-awareness and self-compassion. From my interviews with former talking circle participants, the strongest themes to come out of the analysis were: increased communication skills, increased awareness, improved relationships, less judgment, increased empathy, increased openness and a sense of connection. All of these themes are valued within a womanist framework and that makes womanism a compatible lens through which to study and understand the practice of compassionate listening as a form of spiritual activism. All of the former talking circle participants acknowledged the practice of compassionate listening as a tool for personal and social change although not all of the participants used the language of spirituality.

Literature Review

Compassionate Listening

The term compassionate listening originated with Gene Knudsen Hoffman, an international peacemaker, founder of the US/USSR Reconciliation program for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and student of Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. Leah Green founded the TCLP organization in 1990 and built upon Hoffman's ideas on compassionate listening in her training and development curricula. TCLP began under the umbrella of Earthstewards Network. In the TCLP handbook, "Listening with the Heart: A Guide for Compassionate Listening" (2001), Danaan, co-founder of Earthstewards Network, described compassionate listening as:

> Compassionate Listening is a quality of listening which creates a safe container for people to be free to express themselves and to go to the level of their deep concerns. It simply and profoundly means empathizing with the feelings and condition of people who have been affected by events and circumstances, sometimes of their own doing, and sometimes out of their control. It has everything to do with caring for the state of another human being. (p. 3)

As Hoffman (2003) originally conceived it, compassionate listening requires non-adversarial questions and non-judgmental listening. Green (2011) describes the intent of the compassionate listener: "Compassionate Listeners use inquiry in a healing way with the intent of helping the speaker delve more deeply, rather than as a means to satisfy the listener's curiosity" (p. 47). Listeners seek the truth of the person questioned and are able to see through the fear and/or hostility of the individual speaking. They seek to humanize the other: they accept, without judgment, what the speaker is saying and validate the right of the speaker to claim those perceptions. Compassionate listening can difuse barriers of defense and mistrust, enabling both the speaker and listener to hear their own thoughts, to change their opinions, and to make more informed decisions. Compassionate listening is a learned skill and a process. Rabbi David Zaslow discusses compassionate listening:

Compassionate Listening is a process rather than a product. It is healing precisely because it does not pretend to "have the answers." Rather, it engages the participants in processes that have each side seeing the humanity of the other, even when they disagree. ("The Compassionate Listening Project," para. 1)

TCLP leaders maintain that listening is the core of their practice and the precursor to dialogue and reconciliation; the leaders added speaking from the heart as a central skill in their training and provide a list of tips for practicing compassionate listening (see Appendix A for compassionate listening tips). In Listening with the Heart, Hoffman (2001) elucidates this particular skill as a crucial component of compassionate listening:

> I'm not talking about listening with the "human ear." I am talking about discerning. To discern means to perceive something hidden or obscure. We must listen with our "spiritual ear." This is very different from deciding in advance who is right and who is wrong, and then seeking to rectify it. (p. xiii)

There is a difference between typical listening that involves judging what the speaker is saying and forming a response ahead of replying and the process and skill that are engaged when one practices compassionate listening. Through insight and awareness of prejudices and assumptions, listeners begin to practice being present with the speaker without the need to judge or change what the speaker is saying. Hoffman delineates her idea of how compassionate listening is a spiritual practice:

> Compassionate listening can become a spiritual practice. We touch Spirit when we realize the sacredness in what we are experiencing. When we look at a flower and can really see the magic of the form and color and the tenuousness of its place in the universe, we have touched Spirit. When we hold a rock and can realize this rock is billions of years old and its source is the same as ours: the original stuff of the universe, we have touched spirit. (p. 4)

According to Hoffman, compassionate listening is a sacred practice that benefits both the speaker and the listener. Scholar-activist Victoria Genetin (2012) identified a relationship between Hahn's Buddhist practice and Anzaldúa's spiritual activism and claimed a there was a lack of feminist or Buddhist scholars drawing connections between their work. She put the two in dialogue in order to provide alternative ways to read and understand their philosophies as well as offer scholars and activists a more global and radical political context to ground both their theoretical framework and activist practice. Similar to her research, I am looking at compassionate listening as a contemplative practice and how it can manifest social change through spiritual activism. In this research study, I plan to investigate the ability compassionate listening has to increase awareness and create change in the speaker, listener and in society. When a listener can be present for an individual that is speaking, regardless of personal agendas, beliefs and assumptions, a space can be created for the speaker to share her experience. Connection, openness and transformation are some of the benefits that Lindahl (2003) discusses. She emphasizes, "once we begin to think about listening as a gift that we give to someone else, we often find that we open up the space for even more listening within ourselves, our capacity to listen expands" (p. 9). Due to the emphasis on connectedness, increasing awareness in both the speaker and the listener, the ability to create change in both the speaker and listener and in society, compassionate listening may be considered a form of spiritual activism.

Whether it is referred to as sacred or spiritual, compassionate listening moves beyond the individual to create a space for social transformation (Lindahl, 2003). Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) emphasizes the importance of reflective dialogue; it is analogous to compassionate listening in its ability to transform. Reflective dialogue creates a space for awareness and conflict resolution:

> This work of spiritual activism and the contract of holistic alliances allows conflict to dissolve through reflective dialogue. It permits an expansive awareness that finds the best instead of the worst in the other, enabling you to think of la *otra* in a compassionate way. Accepting the other as an equal in a joint endeavor, you respect and are fully present for her. You form an intimate connection that fosters the empowerment of both (*nos/otras*) to transform conflict into an

opportunity to resolve an issue, to change negativities into strengths, and to heal the traumas of

racism and other systemic *desconocimientos*. (pp. 572-573)

Important in my research, reflective dialogue creates an intimate connection that encourages systemic

transformation. Reflective dialogue and compassionate listening are forms of communication discussed

throughout the tenets of TCLP and TTC.

In the education literature, Waks (2010) introduces the terms cataphatic and apophatic in

reference to two types of interpersonal listening. Cataphatic listening refers to the use of categorizing or

marking distinctions; the listener is not open to co-creating meaning with the speaker but instead is

bringing his or her own opinions and values into the conversation for the purpose of forming an opinion.

Apophatic listening involves the bracketing of personal values, biases and opinions to remain receptive to

what the speaker is saying. With this openness comes an acceptance not available when the listener is

gathering information to categorize or make distinctions. Waks (2010) argues that there is a benefit to

being accepting and open to the speaker through apophatic listening, "sensing this, the speaker can then

also expand in speaking without fear of outstripping the listeners' receptive capacities--it is like

contemplation, an inherently religious act" (p. 9). Contemplation framed as a religious or spiritual act

relates to my research question about the relationship between compassionate listening and spiritual

activism. If contemplation is thought to be a component of compassionate listening and compassionate

listening is considered a form of activism, the practice of compassionate listening can be considered

spiritual activism.

Adversely, in "Compassionate, Spiritual, and Creative Listening in Teaching and Learning"

(2010), Jim Garrison speaks about the negative effects of cataphatic listeners when they seek to end the

suffering in others, "Rigid cataphatic listening and thinking controlled by fixed categories, concepts, and

principles of identity lies at the core of all kinds of colonialism and miseducation" (p. 6). The distinction

between cataphatic and apophatic listening mirrors a major difference between everyday listening and

compassionate listening. Unlike everyday listening, the practice of compassionate listening brings an

openness and acceptance to the conversation. Through a space that allows for a co-creation knowledge, the practice of compassionate listening may contribute to personal and social transformation by creating agency for the speaker in the very act of co-creating meaning with the listener.

Another conversation on compassion occurs in the political arena where compassion is discussed in relationship to states/nations. While this critique is important, it is not central to the framework of this thesis.[1] However, the idea that compassion is partially motivated by something external to the individual is important to my research; it relates to the question about the effects of compassionate listening on social change. Garber claims compassion comes from the influence of specific outside sources namely religion, philosophy and politics. The spiritual component of the practice of compassionate listening is not necessarily tied to outside sources such as religion, or at least not any specific organized religion, so much that it is learned from a religious, spiritual or philosophical realm. This study is focused on the personal level however, the overarching framework is to prove that compassionate listening ultimately effects change at the social level as well.

Spirituality

Spiritual activism serves as a framework in this research project. In order to understand the relationship between compassionate listening and spiritual activism, it is important to examine how spirituality is defined by those who theorize about spiritual activism. For Anzaldúa (2000), spirituality is a

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[1] Berlant (2004) discusses compassion from the perspective of the United States, "the word compassion carries the weight of ongoing debates about the ethics of privilege – in particular about the state as an economic, military, and moral actor that represents and establishes collective norms of obligations" (p. 1). Garber (2004) claims that compassion has increasingly become associated with human rights, children's rights, animal rights, and multiculturalism. She maintains that the political use of compassion is disingenuous: "a person who shows compassion seems motivated, at least in part, by values and precepts, often those learned from religion, philosophy, or politics" (p. 24).

highly political, always embodied endeavor that has nothing in common with conventional forms of religion. She rejects organized religions for their divisive tendencies and claims, "Spirituality has nothing to do with religion…religion eliminates all kinds of growth, development, and change, and that's why I think any kind of formalized religion is really bad" (p. 98).

In *Interviews/Entrevistas (2000).* Anzaldúa mentions that the spiritual part of her work is the most ignored and often avoided in academia:

> The "safe" elements in *Borderlands* are procreated and used, and the "unsafe" elements are not talked about. One thing that does not get talked about is the connection between the body, mind, and spirit, anything that has to do with the sacred, anything that has to do with the spirit. (p. 159)

She's identifies a resistance to the spiritual dimensions of activism possibly due to the over-emphasis on a rational, scientific, and theoretical mode of thinking. The legitimacy of knowledge based on spirituality, intuition, emotion, and mysticism are often questioned.

In "now let us shift," Anzaldúa (2002) loosely defines spirituality as "The ability to recognize and endow meaning to daily experience" (p. 568). She also claims that spirituality does not come from something external but emerges from listening to intuition or inner voice. A similar idea is discussed by Fernandes (2003):

> When I speak of spirituality, at the most basic level I am referring to an understanding of the self as encompassing body and mind, as well as spirit. Spirituality can be as much about practices of compassion, love, ethics and truth defined in nonreligious terms as it can be related to the mystical reinterpretations of existing religious traditions. (p. 10)

The idea that spirituality encompasses body, mind and spirit and that honoring intuition is a spiritual act emerged throughout my literature review on spiritual activism. Through the practice of compassionate listening, the space for honoring intuition is created.

Spiritual Activism

The concepts of spirituality and activism are typically perceived as being mutually exclusive. Spirituality is associated with an inner or other-worldly experience; whereas, activism is associated with activity in the external or material world. However, in spiritual activism, the spiritual work begins with the individual and then moves outward to create transformation in the world, to challenge both oppression and unjust social structures. Anzaldúa (2005) argues that the relationship between self-change and social transformation are mutually interdependent and says, "I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world…a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society" (p. 244). Similarly, on TCLP's website, a quote from U.S. Congressman Dennis Kucinich discusses the very idea of inner works and outer works to which Anzaldúa refers:

> If we can change ourselves, we can change the world. We're not the victims of the world we see, we're the victims of the way we see the world. This is the essence of Compassionate Listening: seeing the person next to you as a part of yourself." ("The Compassionate Listening Project" 2013, para. 1)

Keating (2005) is in congruence with Anzaldúa, when she describes spiritual activism: "spiritual activism combines self-reflection and self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts designed to bring about material change" (p. 244). Keating further differentiates between spiritual activism and organized religion by claiming that the latter imposes authority on individuals through external teachings, texts, standards, and leaders. In comparison, spiritual activism does not subscribe to the use of external power to manipulate or control individuals but, instead, stems from an intrinsic search for answers and new ways of thinking about social issues.

A common theme in Anzaldúa's work on spiritual activism is the concept of interconnectedness. In relation to interconnectedness, she refers to the term relational selfhood. Relational selfhood can be seen in the practice of compassionate listening; together the listener and speaker create a space to allow

self-reflection and self-change. Interconnectedness between the listener and speaker is what allows for the self-transformation. Other theorists, such as Mani, Fernandes and Keating also speak of the concept of interconnectedness in their work. Keating (2000) quotes Anzaldúa from an interview with Kim Irving. "Everything has a meaning. Everything is interconnected. To me, spirituality and being spiritual means to be aware of the interconnections between things" (p. 9). In the introduction to *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Keating describes Anzaldúa's emphasis on radical interconnectedness. "She uses a spiritualized worldview to synthesize social activism with spiritual vision, creating what she elsewhere describes as spiritual activism. Spiritual activism is a visionary yet practical form of activism based on the belief in our radical interconnectedness" (p. 16).

This idea of radical interconnectedness is interspersed throughout her work and involves a holistic component, a relational selfhood versus a hyper-individualism. By defining each human being as part of a cosmic whole, Anzaldúa develops theoretical justification and motivation that links self-reflection and self-change with social transformation. Likewise, in *SacredSecular: Contemplative Cultural Critique* (2009), the idea of interconnectedness is seen in Lata Mani's theory on spirituality, "One forcefully discovers the inextricable inter-relatedness of everything in the phenomenal world. Each one of our thoughts, each one of our actions reverberates to the farthest reaches of the universe and even affects the cycles of nature" (p. 10). When speaking of social transformation, Fernandes (2003) refers the idea of connection in regards to spirituality:

> When I speak of spirituality, at the most basic level I am referring to an understanding of the self as encompassing body and mind, as well as spirit. I am also referring to transcendent sense of interconnection that moves beyond the knowable, visible material world. This interconnection has been described variously as divinity, the sacred, spirit or simply the universe. (p. 10)

Interconnectedness and how it relates to change in the world is important when looking at how compassionate listening effects social change. If what is done on an individual level has an effect in the world, the practice of compassionate listening can be considered a form of activism. In spiritual activism,

the spiritual work begins at the personal level and then moves to the social level to create change in the world, to resist and interrogate oppression and social structures. With compassionate listening being a contemplative practice, it can be considered spiritual activism.

Another common theme in Anzaldúa's work on spiritual activism is the idea of commonalities between people. Throughout her writing, she recognizes that there are many differences between and among individuals however, she believes that they also share commonalities such as the basic human desire "to be heard, understood, and accepted" (p. 567). Her relational approach to commonalities and differences problematizes identity categories based on simplistic binary understandings of gender, ethnicity/race, class, sexuality and other social labels. She claims that by looking at commonalities while simultaneously respecting the differences between and among people, social activists can resist individual and systemic racism, sexism, and classism along with other social injustice and use them as catalysts for change. The idea of respecting other's commonalities while simultaneously respecting their differences is a component of compassionate listening practice. By respecting others' different ideas, values, opinions and experiences, the compassionate listener is able to allow the speaker to share their ideas and experiences without fear of being judged.

Although it cannot be proven that Anzaldúa coined the term spiritual activism, it is through her work and the work of those in her circle that it gained increased visibility. Feminist scholar Chela Sandoval (2005) describes spiritual activism as "The theoretical-ethical-moral-emotional-intellectual work they pledged to do as U.S. third-world feminists" (p. xv). Likewise, Keating (2005) defines spiritual activism as "a visionary, experientially-based epistemology and ethics, a way of life and a call to action. At the epistemological level, spiritual activism posits a metaphysics of interconnectedness and employs relational modes of thinking" (p. 242).

Throughout her work, Anzaldúa articulates the relationship between spirituality and activism as well as politics, gender, sex, and race. Anzaldúa's theory of the interdependence of inner and outer work is what informs my research; one of TTC's missions is to provide a safe space for girls to do the inner

work that will simultaneously lead to and interact with outer works. TTC's idea of inner work refers to discovering one's voice and listening with compassion. According to TTC, the practice of compassionate listening has the ability to transform an individual and everyone that she/he encounters. The transformation of those that they encounter can be considered outer work.

Womanism

My inquiry into the relationship between spiritual activism and social activism through the act of compassionate listening led me to the social change perspective of womanism. Womanism includes two aspects that relate directly to my research interests: everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension in regards to compassionate listening as a form of spiritual activism. According to Layli Maparyan (2012), one of womanism's unique components that distinguishes it from other feminist movements is spirituality. Womanism is a worldview and not just a theory or ideology. Womanism is a "spirit," a "walk," and a "way of being in the world" (p. 33).

Womanism provides the most useful theoretical framework through which to explore spiritual activism. The term womanism has been in use since the late 19th century but is generally attributed to Alice Walker. Walker (1983) claims that womanism encompasses feminism however; it is strongly rooted in Black women's culture. Maparyan (2006) defines womanism as:

> A social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (p. xx)

Compassionate listening is a tool that can be practiced in everyday spaces and a method for problem solving and conflict resolution; it also creates a space for increased self-awareness. It is a form of spiritual activism; therefore, womanism, as a social change perspective, is the best lens through which to consider

the question of compassionate listening's effect on social change and the relationship between spiritual and social activism.

Epistemologically speaking, womanism is not argument-based, it does not privilege rationality, and it does not rest its case on academic intelligibility. Instead, it privileges the experience of inspiration, a heightened, non-rational spiritual state that makes the seemingly impossible possible: materially, socially, politically, economically, ecologically, psychologically, and relationally (Maparyan, 2012). Similarly, Mani (2009) addresses this need to be open to alternative ways of knowing to consider contemplative insight as valuable, "To bring the insights of spiritual and secular knowledge to bear on current phenomena thus requires one to translate between and across epistemes or ways of knowing" (p. 2). Likewise, Maparyan (2012) claims:

> Because spirit pervades everything, knowledge is ubiquitous. That is, it is everywhere present and available. Rationality – thinking, reasoning, deducing, inducing, analysis – is one approach to knowledge. Another approach to knowledge is intuition – direct perception or apprehension, gained by sudden insight, focused contemplation, deep meditation, or even dreams. (p. 38)

The claim that knowledge comes from many sources is important to my research because I consider the participant's internal experiences to be a form of legitimate knowledge production. Anzaldúa (2002) maintains the same view on knowledge production. She speaks of alternative ways of knowing outside of the scientific methods of knowledge production and binary ways of thinking/ reasoning. She talks about forms of lived knowledge and intuition, unmediated by mental constructs, a more direct knowing:

> Many are witnessing a major cultural shift in their understanding of what knowledge consists of and how we come to know, a shift from the kinds of knowledge valued now to the kinds that will be desired in the twenty-first century, a shift away from knowledge contributing both to military and corporate technologies and the colonization of our lives by TV and the Internet, to the inner

exploration of the meaning and purpose of life. You attribute this shift to the feminization of

knowledge, one beyond the subject-object divide. (p. 541)

She addresses the shift from outer knowledge to inner knowledge. She theorizes that society is beginning

to value this form of knowledge that historically has been discredited and considered non-legitimate. She

speaks of a passion that to know and deepen our awareness and understand ourselves and the universe and

by revisiting the idea of interconnectedness, it can then be said that understanding and changing ourselves

can lead to understanding and changing the world or essentially it can lead to social change.

There is a connection between the work TTC undertakes with teen girls and the use of

compassionate listening, spiritual activism and womanism. Anzaldúa (2002) maintains that spiritual

activism locates authority within each individual and links inner change with outer change similar to

womanism. She claims one must begin with the inner work first at the same time that it is interdependent

with the "outer" works of action. Similarly, womanism claims that one changes the world by first

changing oneself and that these changes influence each other simultaneously.

The idea of the interrelation of changing oneself and changing the world is discussed in *This

Bridge We Call Home* (2002) where Anzaldúa expands on the term *conocimiento*. She defines it as a

holistic epistemology that incorporates self-reflection, imagination, intuition, sensory experiences,

rational thought, outward-directed action, and social-justice concerns:

This work of spiritual activism and the contract of holistic alliances allows conflict to dissolve

through reflective dialogue…You dedicate yourself, not to surface solutions that benefit only one

group, but to a more informed service to humanity…When one person steps into conocimiento,

the whole of humanity witnesses that step and eventually steps into consciousness. (pp. 572-73)

This holistic approach to knowledge production and social change is seen in TTC. The facilitators at TTC

also value the idea of working with teens to develop holistic methods of emerging self-awareness. TTC

perceives a direct correlation between developing a new kind of consciousness and social change,

including the belief that all life is interconnected. They believe that an individual's well-being is dependent on the well-being of everything and everyone on the planet. By developing this new consciousness, teens can create sustainable relationships that can ultimately translate to social change.

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study were four-fold. The first purpose was to explore the experience of the practice of compassionate listening in a talking circle through my personal participation in a circle in a facilitator training workshop. The second purpose was to explore former teen talking circle participant's experiences and perceptions of the practice of compassionate listening. The third purpose was to determine if former teen talking circle participants perceive compassionate listening as a way of effecting social change. The fourth purpose was to determine if former teen talking circle participants associate compassionate listening as a form of spiritual activism.

Significance of the Study

Studies on compassion and contemplative practices are on the forefront of research at major universities such as Stanford School of Medicine and Emory University. Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education mission is, "to investigate methods for cultivating compassion and promote altruism within individuals and society through rigorous research, scientific collaborations, and academic conferences" (Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, 2012, "Mission," para. 1). At Emory, His Holiness the Dalai Lama joined the university as a Presidential Distinguished Professor. The Emory-Tibet Partnership began in 2007 with the recognition of the potential for an exchange of people and ideas that encompasses the areas of culture, philosophy, religion, science and health. The scientific study of compassion meditation is significant. "Scientists in diverse fields are more recently pointing out the importance of compassion for human happiness and well-being" (Emory-Tibet Partnership, 2013, "Cognitively-Based Compassion Training," para. 2). Although these universities are mainly looking at the neurobiological aspects of compassion and empathy,

the fact that compassion research is heavily funded can lead to a broader scope of research in the future. Due to this new area of funded research on compassion and empathy, my study can contribute to this body of knowledge. With a greater understanding of the experience and effects of the practice of compassionate listening in talking circles, the benefits may be seen for further research on the practice of compassionate listening in other areas.

Methods

For the purpose of this study, qualitative methodologies were used. Qualitative research is a broad term for methodologies that seek to include the words and stories of participants; participant perspectives add to an existing body of knowledge or to generate knowledge about an unexplored topic (Creswell, 2009). In this section, qualitative research and the qualitative methodologies that were used in this study are discussed. This includes the sample selection for the study, data collection and analysis methods.

Qualitative Research

I chose to use qualitative research methods for this study because qualitative methods offered a more holistic understanding of former participant's experience as well as my own experience in a circle with the practice of compassionate listening. I used autoethnography to explore the use of compassionate listening in a talking circle through attending a TTC facilitator training workshop. "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis, 2004; Holman, 2005). Additionally, I wanted to understand how former talking circle participants perceived and interpreted their circle experience and how they perceived compassionate listening in relation to spiritual activism and social change. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) offer a generic definition of qualitative research:

> [It] is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a
> set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the
> world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews,

conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. (p. 3)

The purpose in using qualitative research methods for this study was to make the former circle participant's, along with my own, perceptions and interpretations of compassionate listening in a talking circle visible. Another purpose was to use our stories and perspectives to generate knowledge about the experience and use of compassionate listening as a tool for social change.

Sample Selection

Potential research participants were identified through Linda Wolf, the co-founder of TTC. A recruitment flyer with a brief description of the purpose of the study and my contact information was created and distributed to former talking circle participants via email and Facebook (see Appendix D for recruitment flyer). Former talking circle participants were advised to contact me personally if they were interested in participating in a 45-60 minute telephone interview. When a former talking circle participant contacted me about the study, I explained the purpose of the study. I described the specifics of the interview and asked if she wanted to participate. I arranged to send the person a consent form (see Appendix E for consent form) and arranged an interview time.

Interviews

I interviewed seven former talking circle participants. The sample size was small due to my intention of providing rich and meaningful insights. By focusing on a smaller sample, I was able to spend more time with each participant. Through enacting the process of compassionate listening and practicing some of the behaviors such as staying present and allowing silence (see appendix A for a complete list of compassionate listening behaviors), a small sample size allowed for a richness of material that only an intense focus will permit.

Semi-structured interviews were the means of data collection. To allow flexibility while ensuring some control over the material to be covered, I used a standardized open-ended interview where I could

ensure that certain questions were asked of all of the participants. Questions were worded to allow for open-ended responses; this type of questioning allowed participants to share as much detailed information as they desired while also allowing the researcher to follow-up with additional exploratory questions. The interviews were audio-recorded. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interviews ranged between 45 and 60 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted via telephone.

Transcriptions

During the interviews, my goal was to secure the perspectives and voices of the participants. The next step was to transcribe the interview tapes. I transcribed all of the tapes myself. Once the tapes were transcribed, I listened to each tape and read the transcript. By transcribing the tapes myself, I was able to immerse myself in the participant's stories in a different way than when I was conducting the interview. I was able to practice compassionate listening with mindfulness.

Coding and Analysis

I printed all of the transcripts and read them over several times. The interview protocol itself provided a context for organizing thought and determining what was interesting for a first reading. After the first reading, initial discoveries and emerging themes were noted. This process of coding and analysis helped me to make sense of the data. I used a grounded theory approach for coding and analysis. Grounded theory is an inductive process whereby the material from individual interviews is first coded and analyzed and then compared and contrasted with the material from others to see what emerges as a theoretical framework that explains the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These themes or codes are consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas that were common among research participants.

In the next phase, I used a manual color coding system to read through and identify blocks of material that correspond with the major themes that were identified in the interview protocol as related to the research questions. Continuing to use a color coding system, I also had the opportunity to discover

emerging categories and themes that may not have been included in the protocol. In the end, all of the material from all of the interviews corresponding to a particular theme was placed together.

Analysis of the interview material included: (1) In-depth reading and rereading of each individual transcript to immerse myself in the data and to see the world from the respondent's point of view; (2) At a different level of depth and analysis, I read all parts of the individual interviews per their codes and put into themes; (3) And, finally, when all of the interviews were divided into themes, I performed an analysis to see the subtle patterns of similarities and differences that emerged from one respondent to another. My goal was to achieve a balance of structure and openness. The coding and initial analysis was guided by the research questions. However, the unique experience of the subjects and the richness of the interview process itself provided an opportunity for unanticipated areas of exploration.

Chapter Summary

This first chapter began with a brief history of TTC. After this, I provided a brief discussion and literature review of compassionate listening, spirituality, spiritual activism, and womanism. This was followed by the purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study. Next, a brief overview of the methods used was presented.

Organization of Subsequent Chapters

In Chapter 2, I begin by describing my experience as a participant at a TTC facilitator training workshop; I explain its significance for my personal transformation and research. Next, I analyze the TTC facilitator training manual, *Teen Talking Circle Project Speaking and Listening from the Heart Facilitator's* (2005) in order to explore the use and effects of the activities and exercises on personal and social transformation. In chapter 3, I begin with a thematic analysis of the former talking circle participant interviews. Finally, I conclude the study and offer suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2 TEEN TALKING CIRCLES' FACILITATOR TRAINING WORKSHOP

In June of 2012, I attended a Teen Talking Circles' (TTC) facilitator training workshop held on Bainbridge Island, Washington. My goals were to explore the purpose of teen talking circles, experience what transpires in a circle, gain a better understanding of the practice of compassionate listening, and learn how the practice of compassionate listening might enact change in the world. Those goals were exceeded. I experienced first-hand what it means to sit in a circle and practice compassionate listening in a group. I learned that the practice of compassionate listening is difficult. When I think I am fully present and available to another, oftentimes I am not. Often times I think I listen with the intent to hear while in reality I listen in order to reply. I realized that no matter how hard I try to be objective, I filter what is being said through my own experiences and form my opinions and responses. I found out how extremely hard it is to sit still, be present, and listen without interrupting with my own experience or to offer a solution. It is also very difficult to sit while someone is in crisis. I learned through the workshop experience that interruptions of any sort while a person is sharing her experience can sway the conversation and prevent the speaker from following her own train of thought. From my circle experience, I realized that I need to learn to sit with deep emotions in myself and in others instead of avoiding them or trying to offer solutions. I am not my feelings; feelings are temporary and can be a source for transformation. By allowing feelings to surface and embracing them as a process, I have the opportunity to gain understanding and awareness.

The last day of the workshop was the most challenging exercise of the entire week. Upon reflection, I think it was the lesson I needed most in order to continue with this research. Our workshop group did a two-part exercise called Teen Story as part of the self-work that needs to be done before a facilitator works with teens. In order to serve as a facilitator of a teen talking circle it helps to work on oneself by exploring any unresolved issues from one's teen years in order to be emotionally available to the participants. For this exercise, we were told to bring a few teen pictures of ourselves for the exercise. During the morning, we passed our teen pictures around the circle while we took turns telling our story. I

managed to complete my story with little to no emotion. It was more challenging to hear the others tell their stories since some included childhood trauma and abuse. In the afternoon, we were instructed to hold our own teen pictures in our hands and reflect on the younger person looking back at us. We were told to listen for what she needed to hear. I held a picture of myself at fifteen and pregnant and could not talk. I sat quietly and tried to listen to what she would have wanted to say but only felt as if she was telling me to shut up and to mind my own business and that I had already told her secrets that morning. The circle continued to tell their stories and when it came back to me the second time, I was still unable to speak to my teen self. I felt like a failure for not following the instructions and worried I would regret it after the workshop was over, but I refused to go along with the group and make something up when I was not feeling it in my heart.

After the exercise was finished, I spent several weeks reflecting on why I was unable to talk to myself as a teen. The others had no problem giving their teen pep talks through acknowledging how far they had come or addressing their teen's insecurities all the while reassuring their teen that things would turn out okay in the end. From this self-reflection, I came to realize that my inability to complete the exercise was mainly due to my resistance to facing my unresolved teen issues and the feeling that I had failed my teenage self. Due to unhealthy choices I had made as a teenager, she did not trust me to make better choices as an adult. My lack of experience with self-compassion was evident in this exercise. This self-reflection clarified why I was able to tell my teen story without emotion. Gilbert (2009) explains, "People may say that they've been able to 'intellectually' recognize how difficult things were for them but they never really had much sympathy for or felt any kindness towards themselves for having had those experiences" (199). He claims this could be caused by people spending so much of their time in survival mode that they never have a chance to process painful past experiences. There are many ways to tell a story. I told the story from a rational standpoint. I resisted telling the story from an emotional standpoint. Once I had the opportunity to reflect on that experience, I was able to recognize why I could not be present with my emotional self during that exercise. This awareness allowed me to explore my

unresolved feelings from the past and accept my feelings in the present. After this experience of self-reflection and acceptance, I was able to tell my story from my heart instead of rationalizing from my head. The latter is what will later be referred to as speaking and listening with the heart.

An extremely meaningful benefit of compassionate listening is the opportunity to listen to one's self with compassion. Through self-reflection, I was able to understand why I was resistant to the exercise at the workshop. Through reflecting on my inability to complete the Teen Story exercise, I realized the need to practice self-compassion. According to Neff's (2003) definition, "self-compassion entails three main components which overlap and mutually interact: self-kindness versus self-judgment, feelings of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification" (85-102). In order to be a compassionate listener on an outer level, I needed to learn to practice compassionate listening on an inner level. Inner works refers to the work done internally and introspectively. It involves the self-work or work to increase awareness and consciousness. Outer works refers to work in the world such as relationships and social activism. They work together and influence each other. A change in one affects the other. The concept of inner and outer works is in Anzaldúa's (2002) theory of spiritual activism:

> Breaking out of your mental and emotional prison and deepening the range of perception enables you to link inner reflection and vision – the mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, and subtle bodily awareness – with social, political action and lived experiences to generate subversive knowledges. (p. 542)

Personal transformation in the form of a deeper range of perception can fuel one's desire to seek other ways of knowing. There must first be an awareness of alternative ways of knowing before one can begin to work toward changing the status quo or dominant ways of knowing. Anzaldúa condones releasing traumas of the past when she says, "it frees up energy, allowing you to be receptive to the soul's voice and guidance" (p. 559).

The Teen Story exercise was in part about releasing traumas of the past in order to be open to other ways of perceiving. It was also about preparing oneself to be clear and open to listening to another person with compassion. Anzaldúa speaks of the personal and social being linked when she claims, "It inspires you to engage both inner and outer resources to make changes on multiple fronts: inner/spiritual/personal social/collective/material" (p. 561). Pipher (1996) argues, "Many adult clients struggle with the same issues that overwhelmed them as adolescent girls. They struggled alone with the trauma of adolescence and have led decades of adult life with their adolescent experiences unexamined" (p. 25). Until one does the inner work, it can be difficult to be fully available to others. The inner work on the self, examining and working through past traumas, is interrelated to the outer work in the world such as activism for social change. They are interconnected and influence each other.

After exploring the purpose and experiencing the practices of teen talking circles through their facilitator workshop, I gained a deeper understanding of the use and practice of compassionate listening in a circle from a personal perspective. After attending the workshop, I chose to analyze TTC's handbook, *Teen Talking Circle Project Speaking and Listening from the Heart Facilitator's Handbook* (2005) in order to explore how TTC teaches and uses the practice of compassionate listening in the teen talking circles. Additionally, I was interested in how the exercises and activities in the handbook were experienced by talking circle participants. Through interviewing seven former talking circle participants, I heard personal stories of how the exercises and activities utilizing the practice of compassionate listening enacted personal and social change in their lives. From my personal experience and the data collected from the interviews, it is apparent that the handbook provides the means to create a space for a conversation that challenges cultural norms and opens the possibility for transformation on a personal and social level.

Womanist Framework

I used a womanist theoretical framework to interpret the facilitator's handbook. I am specifically interested in TTC's goals regarding the activities and exercises in the handbook, its use of compassionate

listening through those activities and exercises and the effects of those activities and exercises on seven former teen talking circle participants. The womanist framework is the most useful lens for this exploration; it proposes a framework that relates directly to one of the organization's goals in the handbook. According to Maparyan's (2006) definition of womanism, a major tenet of the womanist social change perspective is the idea that social change can be explored and enacted through "everyday experiences and everyday problem solving in everyday spaces" (p. xx). The practice of compassionate listening is a tool that can be used to solve everyday problems in everyday spaces. It is used in the teen talking circles for "nurturing self-acceptance and forgiveness for oneself, as well as others" (Wolf & Welton, 2005, p. 13) along with finding one's voice, conflict resolution and developing empathy.

In *The Womanist Idea*, Maparyan (2012) introduces thirteen tenets of womanism. Four of these relate directly to my research. The first tenet is about social change. It is the "recognition of the idea that social change interventions must incorporate both inner and outer dimensions to actually produce the desired results" (p. 322). Self-change and social change go hand-in-hand. The concept of inner and outer dimensions is referred to on TTC's website, "TTC is a catalyst for civic empowerment and community creation. The practice of making safe spaces where young people find their voice and listen with compassion transforms not only the teens but everyone who then encounters them" (Teen Talking Circles, 2008, "Our Mission," para. 6). A second tenet is about location or the site for social change, "The best site to make change, to transform energy, and conduct interventions is the site called everyday life because everyday life is the most basic locale where consciousness is produced, reinforced, and reified" (p. 323). The practice of compassionate listening is a tool that can be used in everyday life with oneself, family, friends, co-workers or anyone. A third tenet is about who can create social change, "Everyday people are geniuses at making change and we are all everyday people. While this may sound like a paradox, deeper reflection proves that it is not" (p. 323). Compassionate listening is not a skill one needs to get a certification or degree in. It can be self-taught and practiced by everyday people. A fourth tenet relates to the foundation of transformation, "The most basic social-ecological tool for transformation is LOVE.

Love is a particular energy vibration that resonates at the level of our highest and best selves and society. More than just a feeling, it is a technology of change" (p. 323). The exercises in the handbook utilize the actual language and practice of love. In the section speaking and listening with the heart, the effect of feeling a lack of love is addressed:

> Some of us suffered through public humiliation in our school years or experienced constant criticism or abuse that diminished our sense of self-love. When we experience these kinds of negative responses over and over again, it can lead to a deep sense of shame or guilt, feelings of not being good enough, or a belief that we are unlovable. (p. 12)

With the practice of speaking and listening with the heart, a space is created for public humiliation, criticism or abuse to be examined. Talking circles is the space where the inner work of examining previous hurtful experiences can be examined through the practice of speaking and listening with the heart. Once the inner work of self-examination and increased awareness transpires, the outer work of creating social change in everyday life can begin.

Talking Circle

The use of a talking circle is at the very foundation of the teen talking circle's process. Talking circles originated in practices of indigenous people. They are still used by numerous American Indian Nations to carry out a group process. Wolf and Rickard (2003) give a brief description of talking circles in "Talking Circles: A Native American Approach to Experiential Learning":

> The creation of the talking circle has historically been credited to the Woodland Tribes in the Midwest where it was used as a form of parliamentary procedure. The significance of the circle itself is seen as sacred, representing the interconnectedness of all things (people, earth, moon, sun). (p. 39)

Talking circles establish a safe non-hierarchical space in which all participants are given the opportunity to speak without interruptions. Orr (2000) states, "Perhaps the most important dimension of

talking circles is the space they create for all participants to listen unconditionally" (p. 65). The goal of talking circles is to create an opportunity for transformation. Cowan and Adams (2002) claim, "When engaged to its full potential, the Talking Circle transcends individual egos, exclusive dichotomies (e.g., us versus them), and fragmented, disconnected outcomes, and instead provides a whole story" (p. 4). Teen Talking Circles' intention is for the facilitator handbook to be used as a tool for providing a space for teens to tell their truth without being judged. In that space, an opportunity to rise above the individual notion of self and transcend the binary of self and others whereby a more holistic transformation is made available.

Speaking and Listening from the Heart Facilitator's Handbook

The handbook is comprised of five chapters. Chapters one and three most closely relate to my exploration of the goals of the TTC. I focus on them here; they cover the activities and exercises presented in the handbook and the effects of those exercises on personal and social transformation.

Societal expectations can put pressure on individuals and groups to think and behave in ways that may differ from their personal choices. One of TTC's goals for the handbook is to create a space that will support an increase in teen's self-awareness and self-expression. The attention given to cultural expectations at the beginning of the book emphasizes the importance placed on conforming in society and the effect it can have on individuals.

Girls learn early to focus on meeting cultural expectations of what it means to be female. According to a study by Landstedt, Asplund & Gadin (2009):

> Experiences of demands regarding gender performance were mostly mentioned by girls. Some girls expressed expectations regarding how to look and behave as a girl: 'I feel embarrassed if I am not pretty'. Gender performance was relevant in relation to expectations of how to behave and look. Findings indicate that they (girls) experienced the practice of femininity as demanding, controlling, and stressful, and thus as risk factors for mental distress. (pp. 969-973)

In the handbook, there are exercises and activities that challenge gender norms through the practice of speaking and listening from the heart. The goal of these compassionate listening exercises is to increase teen's awareness of their own feelings, beliefs and intuition in order to resist and challenge these external expectations and pressures.

The Experience of Circle

Creating the Container

Wolf and Welton (2005) state that when first starting a teen talking circle it is important to set a tone that facilitates in building trust, safety, and connection. They call it creating the container. The purpose of coming together is, "to see that we are always in a process of becoming; to practice skills that build sustainable relationships; to cultivate compassion for ourselves and others; to work through conflicts; and to know we are interconnected by our shared humanity" (p. 8). Instead of seeing judgment as something to avoid, self-judgment and judgment of others in the circle are considered gifts; they offer clues about unaccepted or unknown parts of oneself. The handbook includes an edited transcript of a conversation that took place between Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan (1995), author of *In a Different Voice* (1982) and *Meetings at the Crossroads* (1992), and two of the girls in a circle. Gilligan was invited to spend an afternoon with the talking circle where she proceeded to talk about the danger of girls losing themselves as they reached adolescence:

> It's important to invite our judgmental and critical voices to come out in the open, and listen to whose voice is speaking, and ask ourselves if we agree with it. It's important to understand where these voices are coming from and how they've become internalized. (p.13)

Gilligan maintains that by inviting the internal critic to be voiced, there is an opportunity to acknowledge it and explore its origins. Once explored, these judgments, whether self-imposed or otherwise, can begin to be questioned. This is the beginning of creating a safe space in which teens can experience being seen, felt, heard, and accepted. Group agreements are introduced; the first is the vow of confidentiality and is a

key component in the creation of the container. Interpersonal conflicts are viewed as an opportunity to

cultivate compassion. In circle, teens are told that by allowing conflicts to surface, an opportunity is

created to permit new skills and tools to be taught and practiced. Circle participants complete a group

contract to ensure all are aware of the circle guidelines on confidentiality. The introductory statements

and group contract often contribute to a feeling of safety.

Safety and/or a "Safe Space"

The concept of safe and/or a safe space is referenced throughout the handbook. This safe space is

a significant aspect of the circle experience and contributes to the ability to share and be present during

the circle. It is attributed to not being judged by others. It is also attributed to the vow of confidentiality

that all participants agree to when first joining a circle.

Cultural/Gender Norms

In the handbook, Wolf and Welton (2005) address many of the pressures teens are under during

adolescence in relation to meeting gender norms. A common theme that comes up in the girls' circles is a

fear of being judged for not meeting those expectations. Pipher (1996) address teen girl's difficulty

articulating the source of their frustration with societal expectations when she says:

> In the sixties Betty Friedan wrote of "the problem with no name." She pointed out that many
>
> women were miserable but couldn't articulate the source of that misery. Adolescent girls today
>
> also face a problem with no name. They know that something is very wrong, but they tend to look
>
> for the source within themselves or their families rather than in broader cultural problems. (pp.
>
> 12-13)

In a nationwide study done by the American Association of University Women (1990), self-esteem,

educational experiences, interest in math and science, and career aspirations of approximately 3,000 girls

and boys between the ages of 9-15 were assessed. The researchers determined that girls begin first grade

with comparable skills and ambition to boys, but by the time girls finish high school, most have suffered a

disproportionate loss of confidence in their academic abilities. Adolescence is a time of transition from childhood to adulthood and critical in the development of self-identity. The AAUW study focused on attitudes toward the self, family, friends and school. One of the results of this study was that adolescent girls experience a large decrease in self-esteem with negative effects compared to boys. "Adolescent girls are more likely than boys to have their declining sense of themselves inhibit their actions and abilities. This difference grows more pronounced with age" (p. 8). Boys were more likely to feel they were good at doing a lot of things. A sense of confidence in the ability to do things and do them well correlates highly with self-confidence and also has a positive effect on self-esteem. Less than a third of the girls said they felt good at a lot of things compared to over half of the boys in the study.

Due to a tendency for society to personalize issues, much attention is given to cultural norms and societal expectations in chapter one of the handbook. Whether those expectations come from family, school, peers, the media, or religion, it is clearly an issue that Wolf and Welton (2005) felt it needed to be addressed. In an interview included in the handbook, Gilligan (2005) addresses the danger of girls losing their voice or sense of agency as they reach adolescence:

> There's that censor that senses every situation and figures out how to deal with it. It is almost like a face in front of a face. It you think you are going to say something wrong or stupid, then it's a good thing not to speak at all because you don't want to have something that really matters to you invalidated by other people. (p. 11)

Gilligan is not advocating that girls not speak at all but is speaking about a teen girl's typical response to the fear of being judged. This inner censor can be attributed to a form of self-protection from judgment. Pipher (1994) describes a phenomenon she witnessed in her female teen patients, "Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Studies show that girls' IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less inclined to take risks" (p. 19). Girls have a lot of anxiety around being vulnerable and this anxiety is partly due to the fear of being judged. TTC's intention is to create a safe space where girls can express themselves with less anxiety

about others judging them. One former talking circle participant that I interviewed described her talking circle experience:

> Being in a secure group where everybody is opening themselves up on the table is really comforting and allows you to expand yourself like you normally wouldn't. It's a very safe place where you know you're not going to be rejected or judged for anything. (Participant 1)

Given this space where they feel safe from judgment, teens are allowed to freely explore their beliefs and behaviors. Through this exploration, teens may begin to learn what it is they actually think and feel. They can proceed to act in ways more in alignment with their beliefs versus what is expected of them.

Cultural norms and issues such as silencing oneself can be explored through a dialogue in the circles. Through listening to the self as well as other participant's stories and feelings, there is an increased sense of awareness, empathy, and trust. This is a prime example of how cultural norms and expectations are challenged within the safety and security of the circle through the practice of compassionate listening. From the creation of a safe space, the circle participants can feel secure and are able to more openly express themselves. In my study, one participant said:

> Having that space was very, very cathartic, it was once a week, you could go and you could sleep if you wanted, you wouldn't have to talk you could just listen and that was so nice to not have pressure and to just be yourself for an hour. (Participant 6)

For this participant, the ability to just be present without the pressure to perform was therapeutic. Although there are some differences, the womanist idea of the kitchen table possesses similar characteristics as the talking circle. Maparyan (2012) acknowledges that "at the table, people can come and go, agree or disagree, take turns talking or speak all at once, and laugh, shout, complain or counsel- even be present in silence" (p. 59). This participant gave an example of how she was able to be silent without any pressure to perform. This space has the ability to contribute to personal transformation by providing the comfort and safety needed for teens to express themselves in whatever way they choose.

Confidentiality

Wolf and Weldon (2005) state, "Nothing creates safety and trust like confidentiality, if the participants are worried their stories will be broadcast outside of the Circle, the sharing will stay at a superficial level" (p. 9). Wolf and Weldon (2005) stress that when a new circle is started, confidentiality is discussed extensively. The facilitators begin the discussion with, "Nothing said in Circle goes outside the Circle. Period" (p. 9). Facilitators acknowledge that it is idealistic to think that everyone, at all times, will maintain confidentiality. To expect teen girls to always uphold this vow of confidentiality seems unrealistic; but, according to a former talking circle facilitator I interviewed in my study, the vow is rarely breached:

> I asked Linda what her experience had been over the years (in regards to the girls in circle not honoring the vow of confidentiality) and she said over all the years she'd done it she'd only had two or three instances where that had happened and even then they went back and learned to repair the damage that was done. (Participant 2)

A key component is not the breach in confidentiality but that those that did break their vow of confidentiality were not shunned and dismissed from the group; instead they were brought back into the group and allowed, through the practice of compassionate listening, to resolve the conflict. This is a prime example of how the practice of compassionate listening provides tools for conflict resolution to young women. It is important for teens to fit in and they will often sacrifice their voice in order to be included instead of being excluded or distanced from their peers. This positive experience with resolving conflict in a safe space gives teens the courage to practice these skills outside of the group and to therefore learn to speak for themselves rather than going along with the group. In speaking for themselves instead of following the status quo, teens have an opportunity to make changes in their circumstances, relationships and in the very systems that construct and dictate cultural norms.

Speaking and Listening from the Heart

Wolf and Weldon (2005) use the name speaking and listening from the heart to describe a practice they teach in circle:

> Speaking and listening with the heart is the courageous honesty it takes to be in touch with and share one's feelings and emotions. It is not necessarily an articulation that is well thought out or reasoned in advance (i.e. coming from the head) nor is it analytical, conceptual, or intellectual.
>
> (p. 10)

Speaking and listening with the heart is an act of intimacy that requires courage from the speaker, an ability to trust the others that are listening not to judge her and a belief in the process. The handbook states that this form of communication can be one of the greatest healing agents for personal and social transformation. I heard this repeated in the interviews with former participants. One participant spoke of how her experience and practice of speaking and listening from the heart influenced conversations that she had outside of the circle. She described this experience with her best friend:

> We would have these conversations about how you treat other people and he picked up a lot of skills in terms of listening from me and that in turn made him a really good listener and good friend, the kind of friend you go to for advice. We helped each other learn how to communicate with people in a more meaningful and selfless way and I guess that's where some of my skills would rub off on another person. (Participant 1)

From her circle experience with the practice of compassionate listening, she was able to talk about what it meant to be a good listener and how to treat others. Before she shared her listening experience with him, she saw her friend as judging others, "He's very nice to people and then he can also be very mean to others without even knowing anything about them, he'll just like go to judgment" (Participant 1). After sharing what she learned in circle, his listening skills increased and he is now someone she sees as a good listener and would even go to him for advice. In this same participant's life, the practice of compassionate

listening was able to enact change in the world. By taking the communication skills she learned in the talking circle out into the world and teaching them to others, it led to an improvement in her relationships and also had a positive effect in her friends' relationships as well.

Interpersonal Relationships

In the section on interpersonal relationships, Wolf and Weldon (2005) explain, "We believe that relationships with others, whether parent teacher, friend, colleague, child, or even stranger, are huge catalysts for self-awareness, self-growth, and healing" (p. 16). They claim that by being in circle, participants are able to practice relationship building skills with each other and they can take those skills out into the world. The relationships they build within group serve as a model for the potential of relationships with people outside of the group. One former participant described her circle experience:

> We had a circle after school so we would go to school and have relationships with our teachers, relationships with our peers all day long that would kind of only reach a surface level and then all of a sudden you're in group and you're going deeper and you're asking deeper questions and going further in yourself and other people and it kind of gives you perspective when you get up and go to school the next morning and the way your relationships are kind of shallow again.

(Participant 5)

The idea of shallow versus deep and meaningful relationships was mentioned in several interviews. A deep relationship was described as consisting of meaningful conversations and vulnerability in regards to the amount of openness and sharing that transpires between the two in the relationship. According to Wolf and Weldon (2005), "The experience of just being heard can bring up tears, and when the first person shows their emotions, others are often moved and inspired to open up too" (p. 14). When this occurs in circle, there is a growth in awareness of the difference between a surface level and a deeper level conversation. Before experiencing this in circle, participants were not always aware of the different levels of depth in their conversations. This increased awareness is important because it can be used in

making choices about what types of relationships one desires. Increased awareness provided the opportunity for enacting change in talking circle participant's interpersonal relationships.

It was evident in the interviews with former participants that the compassionate listening and communication tools practiced in circle increased levels of awareness. Womanism values self-awareness and consciousness raising activities as does TTC. Through the exercises and activities participants engage in within the talking circles, participants are encouraged to participate in a process of increasing self-awareness. Maparyan (2012) discusses levels of awareness and consciousness when she describes the concept of ascension:

> Ascension is the idea that people can experience a "shift" in consciousness that places them at a "higher" level of "vibration." Once one has experienced "the shift," one views the world and life differently, with a greater sense of interconnectedness, more bliss, and the ability to know things directly." (p. 316)

With this change in consciousness, one participant shared how she used these tools outside of the circle in her everyday life:

> It just gave me a really clear perspective of what a relationship can be and what communication can be and what understanding of another girl or another person can be and you want to become a teacher and a leader, at least I did in a lot of ways. (Participant 5)

For this participant, a manifestation of practicing compassionate listening in the circle was the practical tools to make a difference out in the world. She claims that her experience practicing compassionate listening inspired her to accept leadership roles through teaching and mentoring in her community. She spoke of wanting to use those skills learned in circle in her everyday life. Another manifestation of practicing compassionate listening in the circle was the heightened awareness of the different types of relationships one is capable of creating. Again, this awareness comes from the deep relationships that are developed in circle. The exercises and activities in the handbook promote speaking and listening with the

heart which, in turn, contributes to relationships built on honesty and openness. The ability to distinguish between an open and honest relationship and one that is not provides an opportunity to transform current relationships and build new relationships built on these values.

The Impact of Talking Circles on Friendships

Once the teen talking circle participants I interviewed experienced deeper relationships such as the relationships built in circle, they often reported that they never looked at relationships the same again. They were no longer satisfied with shallow or surface communication and purposefully looked for friendships that mirrored the values of honesty and openness. One former participant described the transformation in how she looked at relationships after her circle experience:

> I can definitely tell you that I've noticed a very big difference in the type of friendships that I have with people. Before in my early high school years I had a lot of friends but we never talked about anything that was more than surface level. We never talked about what it means to be in a relationship with someone or any big serious life conversations. I started to make friends who I could have really deep friendships with, like real relationships; they're still my best friends
>
> today. (Participant 1)

Not only did the way former talking circle participants view relationships change after experiencing the practice of compassionate listening in the circle but their expectations for their friendships also changed.

Honoring Diversity

Along with addressing and challenging gender norms, Wolf and Weldon (2005) also address racism. In chapter one, Wolf (2005) introduces White privilege by claiming her White identity and the fact that she works primarily with a white demographic. She describes her experience at a workshop on nonviolence with a group of activists who were mostly people of color. She confesses that she was unaware of the benefits she received daily just by being white. Wolf discusses prejudice and argues that

racism is prejudice plus power. By talking about her white privilege and the history of racism in the circles, she says she is intentionally trying to create a space for a conversation that she hopes will lead to transformation on an individual level and social level:

> For me, it's been a deep and humbling process to face the privileges I have as a white woman; to see and hear the pain of my brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters of color, and deal with the layers of emotions that surface. The more educated I become, the more I bring the subject up with others and feel capable, as a facilitator, to hold the space for young people in my circles to explore their beliefs and experiences of race and power. (p. 25)

Wolf states that she is trying to create a dialogue on racism in the circles that can possibly serve as a catalyst for participants to question the ideologies they are living in and through. According to Moya (2000), "alternative constructions and accounts generated through oppositional struggle (in this case the dialogue and discourse critiquing dominant ideologies) provide new ways of looking at our world that always complicate and often challenge dominant conceptions of what is 'right'" (p. 86). In other words, if given a 'safe space' to question hegemonic ideology, the circle participants have an opportunity to develop alternative ways of thinking and behaving that can ultimately lead to transformation. Given this space, they may be more apt to *speak and listen from their heart*.

Bringing Home the Concepts: Processes, Exercise & Activities in Circles:

Talking Circle Formats

After the essential concepts of the talking circle become familiar to the participants, Wolf and Weldon (2005) suggest a basic format for the group's time together. The format includes: creating a sacred space, setting intentions, meditating, check-in and closing the circle. There is flexibility in this format that allows for topical discussions of any current events that participants may feel the need to address. Any immediate issues that participants may want to talk about or resolve are also honored. In an

intimate group such as a teen talking circle, conflict or tension is often seen as an opportunity to practice compassionate listening.

Heart to Heart

The basic format of the talking circle may change if one of the participants comes to the circle with an issue that requires immediate attention. One of the specific practices used to resolve conflicts is called heart to heart. The practice of "heart to heart" is one of the circle's most important processes when there is conflict between two people. Contemplation and reflection are a significant part of most of the practices and exercises in the talking circles and particularly in this exercise. The process starts with the two people in conflict sitting face-to-face and looking into each other's eyes. Role playing is used if one of the people in the conflict is either not a member of the group or not present. Usually, each person in the conflict asks one person in the circle to sit directly behind her and support her by placing her hands on her back or shoulders during the entire process. Each person is given an opportunity to speak for approximately three minutes. When the first speaker is finished talking, the listener will reflect what she heard the speaker say and the speaker will say whether or not she felt completely heard. There is a script that they are to follow in order for the speaker to avoid overwhelming the listener with too much information.

This process is repeated until the speaker feels that she is completely heard. When this part of the process is complete, it is time to change roles and the listener has the opportunity to be the speaker and state her feelings. One former participant described her experience with a heart to heart session by claiming that it taught her empathy:

> I can think of one time in group when we were doing this role play thing (heart to heart) that really stands out to me. I think Linda (TTC facilitator) was my mom and I was me. I was really angry at my mom for a long time and I remember Linda said, "Are you going to keep carrying that? At some point you're going to have to forgive." My first reaction inside was like, "She

doesn't know what I went through, fuck what she says." and then I thought about it and I was like, "You know, she's right." For me that was the first time as a young adult I started thinking from my mom's perspective instead of my own insular, childlike, teenage "it's all about me" point of view. (Participant 7)

Through the use of the heart to heart exercise, the practice of compassionate listening can effect personal change by creating a greater sense of awareness for both the speaker and the listener. I was able to witness the heart to heart exercise on the last day of the workshop. Three former teen talking circle participants visited the group to answer any questions about teen talking circles. One of the girls was currently having an issue with one of the other girls regarding feeling left out outside of the circle. We were asked by Linda Wolf, the cofounder of TTC and leader of the workshop, if we felt comfortable with the girls doing a heart to heart session in front of us. Once everyone gave their approval, a co-facilitator walked us through each step of the process while the two girls formed a heart to heart session. It was amazing to see how they instinctively followed the script we read about in the handbook and that they felt comfortable being vulnerable in front of nine workshop attendees that they had never met before. That said a lot about the trust they had in the circle.

This experience gave me insight into how the practice of compassionate listening works during conflict. I saw how difficult it was for the teenager to be vulnerable and admit what was bothering her: feeling left out and insecure. Yet with the reassurance and encouragement of the entire circle, a space was created for her to speak her truth. She told the other girl exactly what she felt without accusing her of anything. I could see her relax when given the opportunity to be heard and not interrupted or judged. When the listener reflected back to her what she heard to ensure she was hearing her correctly, they were able to connect from their hearts and work towards resolving the issue. I was most impressed by the second girl's response. After they went back and forth several times until the first girl felt completely heard and respected, the second girl had a turn to say how she felt. Instead of simply agreeing with the first girl and saying she was sorry and promising to include her from that point on, she was realistic in

what she felt and what she was able to do in the future. She said she was sorry that she had hurt the girl's feelings and that it was not her intention. However, she did not take full responsibility for the other girl's feelings. She went on to say that she had a busy social life and was leaving for college out of the country. She explained how she felt pressure. There did not seem to be enough time to fit everyone and everything in before she left for college. She reiterated that it was not personal but that honestly she could not make any promises to get together but she would try. These types of exercises practiced in circles are building skills for the outside world. The ability to have a positive experience during conflict through the practice of compassionate listening increases the likelihood that these teens will use these skills when conflict arises with family, friends and others.

Closing the Circle: Transitioning

Wolf and Weldon (2005) place great importance on closing the circle and divide the closing into four components: transitioning, integrating, expressing gratitude, and celebrating. During the transitioning component, facilitators tell the participants, "Be open to listening to others and hearing their stories – relating to others and reconnecting with those outside of the group will heighten your growth and Circle experience" (p. 71). Participants are encouraged to take the communication skills that they learned in circle out into the world. When asked during the interviews if they felt their practice of compassionate listening made a difference outside of circle, all of the former talking circle participants agreed that it did and one participant gave an example:

> He (good friend) picked up a lot of skills in terms of listening from me and that in turn made him a really good listener and good friend, the kind of friend you go to for advice. He got out of a relationship because he wasn't being a good listener to his girlfriend pretty much and was just very self-centered about it and together we helped each other learn how to communicate with people in a more meaningful and selfless way and I guess that's where some of my skills would rub off on another person. (Participant 1)

This participant felt that by modeling and conversing about communication skills she learned and practiced in circle, she was able to make a difference in the communication skills of her friend. This led to his increased communication skills which led to more meaningful relationships with people. Not only was this participant provided tools for navigating her teen years, she was able to transfer those tools to the outside world.

In *Speaking and Listening from the Heart*, Wolf and Weldon (2005) stage a conversation that provides an opportunity for teens to question what they see and hear. Jane Kilbourne, author of *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel* (2000) and the creator of the film series *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women* (2000) writes in the forward to the facilitator handbook, "We live in a culture surrounded by lies. We are lied to by corporations, by politicians, even by our friends and colleagues. We are told through advertising what we should feel, how we should look and what we should value" (2005). However, through the practice of compassionate listening, we can learn to be aware of and honor our truth. I recognize Teen Talking Circle's mission of reaching an inner wisdom or kernel of truth through the practice of compassionate listening may be seen as problematic. The concept of an inner wisdom or kernel of truth alludes to an innate essence or absolute internal truth unaffected or influenced by our history and social context. A universal or global truth does not exist; however, through the practice of compassionate listening, we can foster an awareness of our place within these ideologies and work from that place to create change. The handbook provides tools such as the practice of compassionate listening to young women for navigating their teen years. By creating the space for this practice, it creates the opportunity to challenge cultural norms and societal expectations.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I began by describing my experience as a participant at a TTC facilitator training workshop and I explained its significance for my personal transformation and research. Next, I analyzed the TTC facilitator training manual, *Teen Talking Circle Project Speaking and Listening from the Heart Facilitator's Handbook (2005)* in order to explore the use and effects of the activities and exercises on the

personal and social transformation of the former teen talking circle participants. Through the handbook analysis I discovered that the activities and exercises introduced in the training manual for use within a talking circle are structured to effect change on a personal and social level. In the interviews with former talking circle participants, I heard examples of how participants perceived and experienced these activities and exercises as able to contribute to their personal transformation and the transformation of their relationships outside of the talking circle. In the next chapter, I will begin with a thematic analysis of the former teen talking circle participant interviews. I will then conclude the study and offer suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF FORMER TTC PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

I would define activism as altering from the main stream. I feel like activism is something that can only really happen if you're taking a chance and stepping outside of what is considered normal. Activism is just bringing the light to a different side of things. I would consider speaking out activism. I definitely think compassionate listening is a form of activism. (Participant 4)

The purposes of this study were four-fold. The first purpose was to explore the experience of the practice of compassionate listening in a talking circle through my personal participation in a circle in a facilitator training workshop. The second purpose was to explore former teen talking circle participant's experiences and perceptions of the practice of compassionate listening. The third purpose was to determine if former teen talking circle participants perceive compassionate listening as a way of effecting social change. The fourth purpose was to determine if former teen talking circle participants associate compassionate listening as a form of spiritual activism.

For this study, qualitative methodologies were used to gain the perspectives of seven former teen talking circle participants. I discovered emerging categories and themes that may not have been part of

the protocol. In the end, all of the material from the interviews corresponding to a particular theme was placed together. My goal was to achieve a balance of structure and openness. The coding and initial analysis was guided by the research questions. However, the unique experience of the participants and the richness of the interview process itself provided an opportunity for unanticipated areas of exploration. After interviewing the former teen talking circle participants, reviewing the transcripts and analyzing the color-coded themes from all seven interviews, the seven strongest themes were identified: increased communication skills, increased awareness, improved relationships, less judgment, increased empathy, increased openness and a sense of connection. Data excerpts support each theme. I conclude that for the seven former participants, the practice of compassionate listening did contribute to personal transformation which led to social changes outside of the talking circles.

Significant Themes

Communication skills was the most significant theme to present itself with 100% of the former teen talking circle respondents reporting an increase in these skills. One participant claimed that participating in a talking circle increased her communication skills by helping her to open up and learn how to have meaningful conversations:

> It really helped me develop a lot of communication skills within myself because that was something I struggled with. I grew up a very quiet and reserved person. I wasn't trained with my parents to have really meaningful conversations with people, it was always something that made me uncomfortable because I wasn't used to it. It was a great opportunity for me to open up to people, force myself to open up. (Participant 1)

Respondents referred to an array of skills when I asked them to elaborate on what they meant by communication skills. Responses were anywhere from increased articulation, "The most important thing I took from circle is my ability to articulate my words, to really convey what I was feeling" (Participant 4) to solving problems through following a format "You're given a format to have communication if you're

having an issue and there is a lot of clarification involved and no wiggle room for miscommunication (Participant 5). Participant 5 felt that the compassionate listening format practiced in the circle could be utilized with family and friends if they were willing to participate. She felt compassionate listening provided effective tools and formats that result in more effective communication and conflict resolution.

There are many forms of communication with dialogue being one closely related to the practice of compassionate listening. Dialogue and the power of the word is considered a highly valued spiritual activity in womanism. According to Maparyan (2012), womanists engage in a number of spiritual activities and these activities are at the foundation of womanist spiritual activism. Spiritual activities as womanist methodology depend on the notion of energy manipulation. This manipulation occurs when energy is "changed in quantity, quality or form" (p. 56). Maparyan claims that because these changes occur on an invisible plane with visible manifestations, they can be named spiritual impacts on the physical world. In discussing dialogue and the power of the word, Maparyan (2012) claims:

> Dialogue is a means by which people express and establish both connection and individuality. Dialogue permits negotiation, reveals standpoint, realizes existential equality, and shapes social reality. Dialogue is the locale where both tension and connection can be present simultaneously; it is the site for both struggle and love. (p. 58)

Womanists understand that language contains power. They recognize this and utilize dialogue to intentionally create change in the world. Maparyan (2012) says, "Watching our language – choosing our words with intentionality and awareness of outcomes, and paying attention to linguistic virtues such as parsimony, kindness, and truth – is an act of spiritual activism" (p. 130). These dialogues can be with oneself, with family, with friends or basically with any person with whom a person comes into contact. Anzaldúa (2002) also emphasizes the power of dialogue when she says:

This work of spiritual activism and the contract of holistic alliances allows conflict to dissolve through reflective dialogue. It permits an expansive awareness that finds the best instead of the worst in the other, enabling you to think of la otra in a compassionate way. (p. 572)

Other theorists also emphasize the creative power of dialogue and claim its potential to create change in the world. Physicist David Bohm (1996) is well-known for his work on dialogue. He claims one of the main features in understanding the process of dialogue is knowing the distinction between dialogue and discussion. Lindahl (2003) interprets Bohm's definition of dialogue as "a flow of meaning through words in which new understandings emerge that might not have been present before" (p. 48). Bohm emphasizes the significance of dialogue as a collaborative form of communication where the intent is the search for a shared meaning beyond individual understandings. Similar to Bohm's theory of dialogue as a collaborative process versus a hierarchal process involving co-creation is hooks' (1989) assertion that dialogue is a form of activism and resistance capable of making change. "Dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech; one that challenges and resists domination" (p. 131). She elaborates on the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims and using dialogue and the power of words to create connections that lead to harmony and transformation.

Cohen (2011) discusses the use of dialogue in conflict resolution and claims that one of the biggest challenges is how to manage the need for a quick resolution when hostility, anger and other indications of conflict arise. "Yet often what is most needed in the heat of the moment is the ability to listen deeply and create the spaciousness for the opening of hearts, softening of positions and co-creation of wise action" (p. 75). Compassionate listening provides the foundation for this type of dialogue. One participant advocated for the use of compassionate listening in response to violent communication in her daily work:

You're listening but I work with patients who are pretty violent at times and it's really helpful with that, like you're listening and that's fine but it kind of helps you know where to go with what

you're saying to them so that they feel that you've heard them and you've understood and you're

not as likely to get hit. (Participant 3)

Another participant spoke about the need for a new and better way to communicate that does not involve

violence in the form of competition, "There needs to be a better way for women to communicate and

work with each other instead of against each other in competition. This (compassionate listening format)

was a good model for that" (Participant 2). Teen talking circles provide a space for conflict resolution

through the practice of compassionate listening in dialogue. Through this process, teens are given the

opportunity to learn to collaborate and work together for change.

Womanists value informal face-to-face dialogue that they often refer to through the metaphor of

the kitchen table. "When the process of dialogue becomes intentional and conscious, energetically

directed toward a well-defined and principled end, dialogue becomes a powerful tool for change" (p. 60).

I see the kitchen table space as very similar to a teen talking circle in that they both are informal, all are

welcome, people can agree or disagree, people can be present in silence, the ambiance is casual, people

share the truths of their lives on equal footing and it is an egalitarian space. "The kitchen table metaphor

highlights the value womanists place on accessibility and inclusiveness around language" (p. 60). TTC

values these qualities of accessibility and inclusiveness as well and built the teen talking circles based on

these principles. The former talking circle participants discussed how the practice of dialogue in the

talking circles not only made them feel a sense of support and belonging, it presented an opportunity for

personal growth. They all claimed that their communication skills improved after participating in a

talking circle.

Maparayan (2012) cites a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh's Fourth Mindfulness Training when

emphasizing the power of words and the intention behind deep listening, "Knowing that words can create

happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully with words that inspire self-confidence, joy

and hope" (p. 59). One participant I interviewed claimed being more honest resulted from practicing

compassionate listening while participating in a talking circle:

I'm definitely more honest. No matter what, it will always be something that I'm going to have to

continuously work on as somebody who wants to be honest with the people around me. I'm

trying not to allow my emotions to get in the mix of it. That is something that is very

important to me, learning how to talk with people. It's still something that I try to practice for

sure. (Participant 6)

When discussing the importance of truth and the power of intentional speech to transmute harmful social conditions into desirable ones, Maparyan (2012) points to the sacredness of dialogue. The logic of womanism is experiential, emotional and narrative and she states, "Truth obtained through dialogue and in relationship with others constitutes a second avenue of validation, because one respects one's fellows and values the process of sharing knowledge and experience" (p. 41). Seen in this way, dialogue is a site of power where energy is transformed and changed and thus capable of creating change. We see this in the example above where participant 6 describes becoming more honest.

Awareness was the second most significant theme to emerge from the data with 85% of the participants reporting an increase in awareness. Awareness or consciousness is a form of knowledge that womanists value for use in creating positive change in the world. For womanists, "the point of intervention for all social and ecological change is consciousness itself which is different from intervening at the level of materiality" (p. 50). As part of the womanist epistemological framework, Maparyan (2012) introduces four rungs on the ladder of learning that consist of information, knowledge, wisdom and enlightenment. Once information is acquired in the first rung, the knowledge is verified in a number of different ways. Womanists value internal validation as a prime source for knowledge verification. "This modality is based on Self-Knowledge, in line with the ancient dictum "Know thy Self," and is sometimes referred to as the "Book of Humanity" (p. 39). During one interview, a participant spoke of self-knowledge as a benefit of being listened to during the practice of compassionate listening:

Aside from listening, the point for the speaker is to learn more about themselves and to hear themselves and hear what's really going on with them because we don't often listen to ourselves talk and in the seat of the listener the goal is to kind of go on that journey with them and then eventually circle it back to learning about yourself. You kind of, at least I do, gain the understanding through that experience that you can learn a lot about yourself by listening to what other people have to say. (Participant 5)

I was not expecting to hear a participant state that being heard or listened to was mainly about hearing or listening to herself. This form of knowledge production and acquisition is in line with womanist epistemology because listening and honoring the self is seen as a valid form of validation and verification of knowledge. It also shows the ability of compassionate listening to create change on a personal level.

Awareness is also spoken of in terms of consciousness by Collins (2000) when she discusses how personal changes within the self through increased consciousness can lead to personal empowerment and ultimately social change. "A changed consciousness encourages people to change the conditions of their lives" (p. 117). She speaks of a raised consciousness as it relates to social change and that it is not always visible or tangible:

But change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of changed is also personally empowering and can develop the "inside" of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. (p. 118)

A participant made a correlation between awareness and changes in the world when she said:

People are becoming more aware, hopefully, that the world is changing and there are lots of amazing, historical things that are happening, that happened today (DOMA) and I think we're moving in a good direction and I'm very happy that gay marriage is going to be legalized and that President Obama is in office. (Participant 7)

This participant's statement reflects her belief in a relationship between levels of awareness on an individual level and changes in the world on a political level. She believes the more aware people become, the more positive changes will occur in the world. Likewise, Anzaldúa (2002) addresses individual consciousness in relation to social consciousness:

> If consciousness is fundamental to the universe as matter and energy, if consciousness is not local, not contained in separate vessels/bodies but is like air and water, energy and matter, then we are all in it together. When one person steps into *conocimiento*, the whole of humanity witnesses that step and eventually steps into consciousness. (p. 573)

In this passage, Anzaldúa contends that there is interconnectedness between all beings. Raising one's consciousness can result in a changed consciousness in others. Similar to Anzaldúa's theory, the womanist worldview is based on an interconnectedness of all things in the universe. According to the participants in this study, the practice of compassionate listening in the talking circles increased their awareness and raised their consciousness. This allowed them to see beyond themselves. In one participant's story, she claims to have gained perspective outside of her own lived experience. "This (compassionate listening) allows people to get the perspective of someone else and you can't think outside the box or your belief systems unless you're able to hear something else" (Participant 2). She experienced an increase in awareness of another's perspective through the practice of compassionate listening.

Improved relationships was the third most significant theme to emerge, with 85% of participants reporting the positive effects that compassionate listening had on their relationships. One positive effect they spoke of was how the talking circle exposed them to the experience of deeper connections in their relationships.

> I can definitely tell you that I've noticed a very big difference in the type of friendships that I have with people. Before in my early high school years and before I had a lot of friends but we

never talked about anything that was more than surface level. I loved them because they were my

best friends but that was about it though. We never talked about what it means to be in a

relationship with someone or any big serious life conversations I never had with them. I started to

make friends who I could have really deep friendships with, like real relationships; they're still

my best friends to this day. (Participant 1)

The talking circle experience enabled this participant to recognize the difference between shallow and

deeper relationships and with that awareness she changed the types of friendships she made and

maintained. Participants also described how they learned to engage in communication as both a speaker

and listener. "I think I've probably been more prone to listening. Maybe not interjecting about myself

when somebody is trying to tell me how they're feeling" (Participant 7).

The womanist worldview includes the idea of interconnectedness and, thus, holds relationships as

a place for transformation. The logic of womanism is experiential and relational. Maparyan (2012)

claims:

Personal experience and personal reality are the ultimate arbiters of truth, because one trusts the

Self to know. Truth obtained through dialogue and in relationship with others constitutes a second

avenue of validation, because one respects one's fellows and values the process of sharing

knowledge and experience. (p. 41)

In womanism, relationships are considered a path of spiritual growth where vulnerability can enable a

more loving, deeper relationship with the self and others. A good relationship involved having the

capacity to be honest and vulnerable while confronting an issue according to one participant:

I feel like I've been able to have very good relationships with people because if something is

bothering me I can sit someone down and ask them directly. I already have this awareness of how

easy it is to just talk to someone and if you're honest and especially with my boyfriend now,

we've been together for two years and it's the most grown up relationship I've ever been in and it

feels really good to be able to sit and actually have meaningful conversations without getting

angry or upset which I feel like a lot of people do and fight whereas that's not what we learned at

all in compassionate listening. (Participant 4)

Former talking circle participants shared how the practice of compassionate listening gave them an opportunity to be themselves. "It's allowed me to be more of myself and it's allowed them to be more who they are. It automatically enriches your relationships because you don't have to tuck yourself in" (Participant 2). The self is valued in womanism and is seen as a source of knowledge and wisdom. Maparyan (2012) states:

Sense is not made for us; rather, we are the sense-makers, the meaning-makers, the authors of

reality. The womanist idea is fundamentally about claiming such self-authorship, spiritual or

otherwise, and allowing ourselves to be guided by our own Inner Light to truth, goodness,

freedom, and, ultimately, commonweal. (p. 113)

She acknowledges the reality that there will be attempts to sway us from self-authorship and reminds us that in any given moment, it is our right to reclaim it. I heard participants talk about their experiences using compassionate listening and participating in a talking circle and they gave examples that included feelings of empowerment and the ability to create the relationships they intentionally chose to seek out and maintain. One participant spoke of the practice of compassionate listening and how it provided her the ability to be herself and what that meant to her:

I've been able to create wonderful relationships in my adult life. [Wonderful relationships look

like] honest relationships, the ability to be yourself and say what's bothering you or also being

secure in being selfless in a relationship, being there for other people. I think that was a big thing

realizing I can be there for them emotionally. I can step back and not always include myself in the

situation if that makes sense. (Participant 6)

This experience is an example of how this woman's former participation in a talking circle and use of

compassionate listening were carried over into her adult life and relationships. These talking circle

experiences and the tools and practices learned within them do not stop when the participants leave the

circle. They carry them into their everyday lives and continue to work on the practice of compassionate

listening in their relationships.

Judgment was a significant theme to emerge from the data, with 70% of participants describing

less judgment in relation to self and others. A safe space to go and share their thoughts and feelings

without judgment was reported most often:

I knew I was uncomfortable doing it but I forced myself to do it and being in a secure group like

that where everybody is just opening themselves up like that on the table it's really comforting

and allows you to expand yourself like you wouldn't normally like I wouldn't do that with any-

body, it's just a very safe and comforting place. Where you know you're not going to be rejected

or judged for anything. (Participant 1)

A feeling of comfort or safety in relation to not being judged was an important benefit to participating in a

talking circle. Participants felt this space was special in the capacity it held for non-judgment and they

found comfort in the circle that they did not necessarily find in other spaces in their life such as school or

home.

Language and speech are powerful tools that have an effect in the world. Just like language,

thoughts are a powerful source of energy. Critical or judgmental thoughts and language can have negative

effects on the physical body and in the world. Maparyan (2012) asserts the womanist view on the power

of the word. "As condensed thoughtforms or symbols and signals of feeling, designed to encounter and

affect the thoughtforms and feelings of their receivers, words are a basic tool of energy transformation.

Womanists recognize the power of the word" (p. 58). Non-judgment and an egalitarian framework are two facets the kitchen table and the talking circle share in common. The power of the word to transform energy and affect the feelings of others is precisely what one participant experienced:

> It makes people around me feel heard and valued more. With girlfriends and things like that because even girlfriends, women are emotional creatures, men as well, it makes them realize I'm not judging them and it has opened up over the years with my husband and my friends the ability for them to feel safer about speaking out about what's on their mind and not worry about how I'm going to take it or that I'm going to get mad, so they feel much more safe to say what's on their mind so the communication level has opened way up. (Participant 2)

The ability to make others feel valued is an example of how powerful the word and language is in the world. Womanists use dialogue as a tool for social change and intentionally use language to create positive feelings and emotions in themselves and others around them. In womanism, language is seen as a tool that can be used in everyday spaces amongst everyday people (p. 129). Every word we speak is an act of activism and contains a vibration. With the use of intentional speech and language, changes in vibrational frequencies can be aimed at producing positive changes in the world.

Not only did former talking circle participants speak about the anxiety and fear of being judged, they also felt the circle was a place where they learned how to recognize when they were judging others and how language and culture and assumptions can be detrimental in dealing with difference and conflict:

> A lot of the time your reaction to what people are saying is protection of what's going on in your life and it was really helpful because we were able, even though it could have been a conflict be-tween two girls, we were able to safely and lovingly sit down and talk to one another and get through issues without the other's ego being a part of it. Not taking things on personally and real-izing that whatever is going on for this person, it's their deal ultimately so you can remove your-self from the situation and just be present with that person and listen with an open heart and no

judgment and that was very important because there were certain issues that came up that were very hard to deal with. (Participant 6)

I think a lot of the time culture gets in the way or language or people don't understand or maybe try to put a label on it I mean I do it myself when you see somebody and you think, "Oh, they're like this" and then you realize what you're doing. I think taking each other for face value really and really trying to get to know each other and talk to each other can only be helpful in any situation. (Participant 7)

Empathy was a significant theme to emerge, with 70% of the participants describing it as increased due to the practice of compassionate listening. The ability to have empathy for others can be transformative for oneself and others. Collins (2000) talks about empathy within the construct of her ethics of caring. She introduces the three components in the ethics of caring as: an emphasis placed on individual uniqueness, the appropriateness of emotions in dialogue and developing the capacity for empathy. In regards to emotions in dialogue, she stresses the importance of *talking with the heart* just as TTC uses *speaking and listening with the heart*. Through empathizing with others, participants claimed they were able to feel what another was feeling as well as appreciate and better understand the experience of another even if it differed from their own:

People are more understanding of each other and where they're coming from even if they can't completely understand the other person's experience at least they have a slight idea, maybe like reading a book where you're like ok or to hear somebody's story, instills that kind of feeling that this other person had or maybe an understanding of well, "I can understand where they're coming from or why they felt the way they did." Or "This is how I would feel if that happened to me." I think that. (Participant 7)

Empathy is helpful in the use of the lived experience in assessing knowledge claims, "Such women felt that because knowledge comes from experience, the best way of understanding another

person's ideas was to develop empathy and share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas"

(p. 259). An increase in an understanding of others through the practice of compassionate listening is

based on the ability to empathize. Through the act of empathizing, one participant was able to step back

and listen without judging the other person:

> You're sort of reading a bunch of things that's going on with them, you know not just what they
>
> are saying but the way they are saying it and the way their body is and all so that you really have
>
> to consider what they are saying, not just blah blah blah or making those kind of judgments, "Oh I
>
> already know what she's going to say" or "I know what she thinks" so you're really giving it
>
> much more thought. (Participant 3)

Anzaldúa (2002) describes how empathy contributes to feelings of connectedness:

> When you empathize and try to see her circumstances from her position, you accommodate the
>
> other's perspective, achieving un *conocimiento* that allows you to shift toward a less defensive,
>
> more inclusive identity. When you relate to others, not as parts, problems, or useful commodities,
>
> but from a connectionist view compassion triggers transformation. (p. 569)

The ability to listen to others and have empathy for their experience was seen by a participant as a useful

tool in problem-solving and making the world a better place:

> I think if everybody knew how to be compassionate towards others and listen to others, the world
>
> would be a much better place. So many problems could be solved just by compassionate
>
> listening, not every problem obviously. Being empathetic for others and really feeling where
>
> they're coming from. (Participant 1)

Gilbert (2009) discusses empathy differently and claims that it has an emotional component as

well as an intuitive component. One brings knowledge and personal experiences to empathy. Our

understanding about why we think and feel and behave as we do, and why others think, feel and behave

as they do, rests on the things that we know about ourselves and other people (p. 203). These assumptions

involve a social and political history. With these assumptions and social and political history, education and awareness are crucial in creating empathy and compassion. One participant emphasized the importance of teaching empathy from a young age:

> I think it needs to start even younger than the teenage years. I think that children need to be taught empathy. Empathy doesn't always come natural for everybody and sometimes if they don't see how something lands on someone else they just don't understand what they haven't been taught. It's just like the bullying situation at school, the bully is a wounded kid as well and so striking out at the bully isn't going to work either, to really get rid of it you have to go down deeper into how it makes somebody feel and why it makes them feel that way. (Participant 2)

Womanism values knowledge, education and learning as a tool for social change. Maparyan (2012) defines good knowledge by stating, "For womanists, good knowledge is knowledge that helps people and other living beings, promoting both balance and well-being within Creation" (p. 37). According to her, education is not about indoctrination but instead about bringing internal and external dimensions of knowledge and experience into balance. This is what Maparyan (2012) claims distinguishes a womanist epistemology from others, "the ability to sustain paradox comfortably, one aspect of which is the ability to respect different truths and the people who hold them without succumbing to discord, animosity, or conflict" (p. 40). Through the teaching and practicing of compassionate listening in the talking circles, empathy can be learned and experienced and has been according to former talking circle participants. In womanism, despite the acknowledgement of the essential goodness of human beings, they still need to be fortified through spiritual and ethical education, the practice of virtue, the wisdom borne of life experience, and an acknowledged connection to something beyond the material realm (p. 134). Maparyan maintains, "Thus, human good has to be cultivated to reach its full potential. Therefore, activities that promote spiritual and ethical education, virtue, and wisdom are modalities of spiritual activism and social change" (p. 135). Through the talking circles, the practice of compassionate listening can serve as a form of education on empathy and a space can be created to hold multiple realities simultaneously. It is through

learning to be comfortable with difference that people can respect other perspectives and work from there to create positive change in the world.

A sense of connection was reported by 70% of the participants. My interest in the practice of compassionate listening as a form of spiritual activism directly relates to the spiritual principle of interconnectedness that the womanist social change perspective values. Maparyan claims, "womanism is rooted in restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension" (p. xx).

The spiritual dimension in womanism encompasses interconnectedness. The theme of interconnectedness was seen throughout the literature review I did on spirituality. With an emphasis on contemplation and connectedness between the speaker and listener, compassionate listening is a spiritual practice. In this study, I was interested in the relationship between compassionate listening and spiritual activism. Former participants spoke of how the practice of compassionate listening led to a feeling of connection to others. One participant actually described compassionate listening as the biggest tool that leads to feelings of connectedness:

> It's the single biggest tool [compassionate listening] for true interpersonal connection with people whether it's a couple using it, whether it's a group of people, whether it's a family, whether it's kids in a classroom, I think it's the single biggest tool, that model. (Participant 2)

Another participant distinguished the difference between an everyday connection and something more that is encouraged and fostered with the practice of compassionate listening:

> Yes, I think it is [compassionate listening] trying to connect people on a different level than how we interact day to day. It's being a part of a group and being active and just being present.
>
> (Participant 6)

In womanism, when talking about a sense of connection, it is important to reach beyond what might be a typical connection to something external. There exists a reclaiming of a connection to the body as a source of wisdom, validation and inspiration. A fourth modality of knowledge verification in womanism involves the body, or bodily intelligence. A connection to the body was mentioned by a participant when they were asked what spiritual activism would look like:

> People being more in touch with themselves, people being connected to their bodies, being connected to their spirits, being connected to what matters to them and what's really important to them deep down after they kind of take away all the bullshit. (Participant 5)

Womanists value bodily experience and the body's ability to detect the truth. "The body is like a tuner capable of distinguishing between different energy frequencies and that it resonates with "truth" or "good knowledge" (Maparyan, 2012, p. 40). Interconnectedness is a foundational feature of reality in a womanist's worldview. Acknowledging connections, to the body, to others, to nature, to spirit is significant in the practice of spiritual activism. The belief that everything is connected and the experience of connectedness can lead to the awareness that everything we think and do has an effect on every other life form.

Openness was a theme to emerge from the data, with 40% of participants describing an increase in openness in relation to self and others. Mindell (1995) states that learning how to process deep emotions lessens resistance to them. With less fear, one can be more open and feelings can surface allowing exploration for their meaning and purpose. One participant shared how the practice of compassionate listening in a talking circle helped her open up and express herself:

> It helps me communicate with those I care about more effectively because I would definitely describe myself as a passive aggressive person. I bury things and I don't even know why I'm just that way. I would find myself calling people up right after a meeting just because I was feeling so passionate about telling them how much I cared about them. It really helped me feel comfortable

> opening up my feelings for people and having more meaningful conversations with people in my
>
> life. (Participant 1)

The TTC facilitator training handbook (2005) contains a section on expressing deep emotions. "The experience of just being heard can bring up tears, and when the first person shows their emotions, others are often moved and inspired to open up too" (p. 14). Wolf & Weldon (2005) also address how cultural and gender differences may be a factor in how quickly or deeply participants share their emotions (p. 14). Many participants spoke about how the practice of compassionate listening in the talking circle created a safe space. They felt it was easier to open up after participating in a circle than it had been before. Openness created more meaningful conversations that may lead to stronger connections in relationships.

Compassionate Listening & Social Change

As part of this study, I was looking at how former talking circle participants perceived compassionate listening in relation to social change. The participants affirmed their belief that compassionate listening has the ability to effect social change. Some of the ways participants viewed compassionate listening as contributing to social change were through increased communication skills, increased awareness, improved relationships, less judgment, increased empathy, increased openness and a sense of connection. Former circle participants that claimed they experienced increased communication skills from the practice of compassionate listening described the following positive effects: improved listening that led to a better understanding of others, increased articulation of their feelings, and increased levels of openness that led to more meaningful conversations and deeper connections in relationships. Increased awareness led to empathy for others, an appreciation for their own situation in life, a better understanding of other's experiences, as well as the ability to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously without conflict. Improved relationships were defined as stronger connections with deeper communication versus surface-level communication. Less judgment consisted of less judgment of themselves and less judging of others. Increased empathy included seeing things from another's perspective and compassion for another's experiences. Increased openness involved former participants

feeling more comfortable opening up and sharing their feelings and experiences with others and an increased desire to express how they felt for their friends and family. A sense of connection was described as feeling more connected to others and a connection to something bigger than themselves. Connection was mentioned mostly in relation to spirituality.

Spirituality

In this study, I was also interested in the former participant's perception of compassionate listening in relation to spiritual activism. In order for me to ask the participants about spiritual activism, it was helpful to understand how they defined spirituality. When asked, participants hesitated for a while before responding. When they did answer, they varied in their responses. At times, they thought I was looking for a predetermined answer. After I explained that there was not a right or wrong answer, they proceeded to explain what spirituality meant to them. The strongest theme to come out of their interpretations of spirituality was that of connection. One participant defined spirituality as, "Spirituality is my connection to the rest of the world, to other people" (Participant 3). This relates to womanism's notion about spirituality being pervasive and everything coming from spirit. Maparyan (2012) defines spiritual reality as, "'Spiritual stuff' is the substrate of all reality and that it pervades everything. Everything is a manifestation of spirit; nothing is without spirit, a perspective I call "Innate Divinity" (p. 34). It explains the interconnectedness between all things and is based on this *spiritual stuff*. One participant emphasized the pervasiveness of spirituality:

> I would consider myself to be a very spiritual person. I don't think spirituality is a God or a right way to live. I think spirituality is a more encompassing being than saying someone's God, I think it has to do with everything, more than just your relationship with said something else, it's your relationship with everything. (Participant 4)

According to Maparyan (2012) spirituality is energetic and vibrational and all things manifest in a way that reflects their rate of vibration. "Innate divinity means that the fundamental essence of human

existence is energetic rather than material" (p. 8). It is composed of a *seed of light* connecting all embodied beings to the something larger than ourselves. One participant referred to a connection to something bigger and a connection when talking about spirituality:

> For me, spirituality is a connection to something much bigger than myself. Spirituality to me is about a belief in something bigger and also a very strong belief in the connectedness between everything whether it's the natural world, whether it's people, that connectedness, microcosm, macrocosm. (Participant 2)

Another participant spoke about her belief in something bigger than humanity and specifically included the earth in a maternal way.

> I believe in something greater than me or humanity. I believe in mother earth. I believe in spirit. I think spirituality is your own belief; it is being in tune with yourself, being in tune with others. (Participant 6)

I found it interesting that she included a connection with herself along with a connection with others. Awareness starting with oneself then moving into an awareness of something bigger than oneself on a universal scale are a significant part of a womanist worldview. Maparyan (2012) maintains that consciousness emanates from self-awareness and self-actualization.

Womanists value awareness and the development or "evolution of consciousness as it relates to Self-awareness, awareness of the larger cosmos, and awareness of the relationship between (essential unity and interconnectedness of) the two" (p. 48). Awareness and connectedness were often spoken of together. One participant defined spirituality as coming from within and being connected to oneself:

> To me spirituality means something that comes from within yourself, it just makes me think of the connection we all share as humans or as just beings. It's about being connected to that part of you where you can really be self-aware and conscious of other people. (Participant 1)

Womanists claim the point of intervention for all social change is consciousness beginning within oneself. Through the investment in self-actualization, which involves developing self-awareness and consciousness, an individual is investing in social good and transformation in the world.

Spiritual Activism & Social Change

Another research question was on the former teen talking circle participant's perception of compassionate listening in relation to spiritual activism. I needed to clarify the participant's knowledge of spiritual activism and then its relationship to social change in order to better understand former participant's perception of the relationship between compassionate listening and social change. Participants referred to a sense of connection and change when asked about the relationship between spiritual activism and social change. Contemplation and self-reflection were mentioned as part of activism when talking about social change in relation to spiritual activism. Anzaldúa (2002) refers to the interdependence of inner and outer work throughout her body of work:

> Internal work coupled with commitment to struggle for social transformation-changes your relationship to your body, and, in turn, to other bodies and to the world. And when that happens, you change the world. (p. 574)

This understanding of social change work involving inner and outer work is foundational to the womanist perspective on activism. One participant spoke specifically about inner and outer work:

> I think anything that encourages people to look inside, because it's all an inside job, I think anytime you want to change what's out there, you've got to work from the inside out. It's the only way I believe things do change and compassion in the very name has to be where it starts. It's hard to have compassion for other people when you don't have compassion for yourself.
> (Participant 2)

Maparyan speaks a lot about vibration and the importance of becoming the change we wish to see in the world through doing inner work on ourselves. "Transformation of our immediate environment makes the inner work easier because it creates an energetic or vibrational match between ourselves and our

environment" (p. 127). She provides the tools to perform a "vibrational inventory" that will allow us to see the degree that our immediate environment raises or lowers our vibrational level. In doing this work, we can observe and transform the way our environments affect our ability to make positive changes in the world. One participant spoke about inner work and her belief in the power of vibrations in the world:

> I think of spirituality as like being sort of an individual thing and I think of activism as more changing the world or changing community or something. I do think that we're all just starting with ourselves and just bring peace to yourself like practicing your own meditation like I do. I believe you're sending out positive vibrations to the world. (Participant 3)

She describes spirituality as starting with herself through inner work that includes incorporating practices such as meditation and sending out positive energy into the world. She exemplifies the womanist perspective on spiritual activities involved in spiritual activism.

Compassionate Listening & Spiritual Activism

When asked how they perceived compassionate listening in relation to spiritual activism, participants were less certain than they were in their belief that compassionate listening had the ability to effect social change. It could be due to the concept of spirituality within spiritual activism. Spiritual and activism are often perceived as being separate entities. The former is associated with an inner experience; whereas, the latter is associated with an external experience. In spiritual activism, the spiritual work begins with the self and moves outward to create change in the world. Participants provided examples of what the practice of spiritual activism might look like that included connection and change:

> Spiritual activism is getting people to really connect with that part of themselves and others which can be defined as spirituality. (Participant 1)

> Spiritual activism is more being a part of something, a movement, a change, being active and making a change and doing it because you really believe in it. (Participant 6)

When asked how they perceived compassionate listening in relation to spiritual activism, participants did see compassionate listening as spiritual activism. They saw a focus on contemplation within the practice of compassionate listening as what contributed to the practice being seen as spiritual. Their use of compassionate listening with the intention of affecting the world through creating positive change was seen as being an activist. Through the practice of compassionate listening that includes contemplation, self-reflection and the intention of creating a positive change in the world, former participants see compassionate listening as a form of spiritual activism.

Integrated Answers to Research Questions

Former teen talking circle participants provided examples of ways that the talking circle experience and the practice of compassionate listening supplied tools that were helpful to them in navigating their teenage years. On an individual level, participants reported that the practice of compassionate listening increased their level of awareness and gave them a stronger feeling of connection to others. On a social level, communication skills were reported as extremely important and useful in their lives inside and outside of the talking circle. All of the participants reported an increase in communication skills. These skills included improved listening, less interrupting while someone else was speaking and an increased ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings to others. The increased ability to articulate was partly due to an increase in their level of openness. Participants reported that an increase in empathy allowed them to see multiple perspectives and to judge others less. They used the communication skills in their relationships at home, at school and in their social lives. They felt this tool was advantageous to building, maintaining and strengthening relationships.

All seven participants believed that compassionate listening has the ability to effect social change. They reported changes in the types of relationships they chose to engage in and maintain. The relationships they chose to engage in and maintain were those that they said included deeper connections. Due to their circle experience, they were able to discern between surface level and deeper level relationships and chose to let go of the surface friendships and foster the deeper ones. One participant said

that a benefit to the practice of compassionate listening would be increased conflict resolution and problem solving due to the involvement of empathy. Participants also felt that by practicing compassionate listening and the communication skills learned in the circle with friends and family outside of the talking circle, they were able to teach others these skills and that had an effect on the other's relationships.

Participants had more difficulty with the idea of spiritual activism. Many had not heard of the concept and were hesitant in responding. Once I explained to them I wanted their interpretation and that there was not a right or wrong answer, they felt more comfortable engaging in a conversation about the topic. However, a few participants were very responsive to a conversation about spirituality and referred to concepts of a connection to something bigger than themselves and a desire to make a change in the world. The contemplative component of compassionate listening was discussed when talking about the relationship between compassionate listening and spiritual activism. I discovered that although compassionate listening is seen as a contemplative practice and capable of making changes in the world, former participants did not always use the word spirit or spirituality when talking about the experience and practice of compassionate listening. Participants agreed that through the practice of compassionate listening, they were able to improve their relationships, serve as an example to others that ultimately had an effect on other's relationships, and through their increased awareness and empathy, gain a better understanding and acceptance of difference in the world.

Limitations

A few limitations in this study pertain to the sample. The sample is a convenience sample meaning; the participants were conveniently accessible with the assistance of the organization by means of their available contacts. The size of the sample is small. I interviewed seven former teen talking circle participants. I conducted these seven interviews over the telephone. Due to the method of the sample selection, the size of the sample and the interviews conducted over the telephone, the results are neither fully representative nor generalizable outside of this sample. Another limitation was the lack of scholarly

research in the area of compassionate listening in relation to social change and spiritual activism. With little previous research pertaining to compassionate listening outside of the peacemaking and reconciliation work at TCLP, scholarly sources to support my area of research were limited.

Implications

TTC can use the information provided in this study to access and improve their workshop and training materials. TTC can also use this information to access and improve the teen talking circle training and experience for current and future talking circle facilitators and participants. The information in this study is useful for those doing research in the area of communication, compassion and listening in relation to social change.

Suggestions for Future Research

For the seven former teen talking circle participants I interviewed, the practice of compassionate listening in a talking circle had positive effects in their personal and social lives. Further research on the use of compassionate listening after participating in a talking circle could be helpful to determine the efficacy of the TTC program. Additional research in the area of compassionate listening and its use in conflict resolution would be advantageous in institutional settings such as families, schools, work and prisons. Educational institutions can benefit from the use of compassionate listening in teaching and learning and in conflict resolution and mediation between students, faculty, staff, families and the community. The information in this study can also be useful for those doing research in the area of adolescents, adolescent girl's voice, communication, compassion and listening in relation to social change.

CONCLUSION

TTC was founded on the principle that both a mature self-identity and healthy relationships develop naturally when people feel free to speak their truth from their hearts and hear the truth of others with their hearts. They teach and practice compassionate listening within talking circles as a tool for learning about the self and others in a safe environment. TTC's intent is to provide teens with valuable skills for navigating their teen years. Talking circles are foundational to the teaching and practicing of compassionate listening and a cornerstone of TTC's framework. In *The Millionth Circle: How to Change Ourselves and the World* (1999), Boden states:

> Just as relationship skills carry over into circles, there is a vice versa; the circle experience can have a radically positive effect on relationships outside of the circle, because it can provide a model – a place to practice honest and caring communication, until this is what you do and expect from others in your life. (p. 16).

The idea is that teens will enter a talking circle and receive support and skills through the practice of speaking and listening from their hearts that will ultimately transfer outside of the circle in ways that create positive changes in the world. Two participants described their circle experience and how supportive it was:

> It was a time in my life where I was very young. I started when I was 14 and did it all the way up until I finished high school at 18. A lot of my girlfriends were in the group at the same time which was nice. It created a little support network for me as well as long lasting relationships. (Participant 6)

> Well in that environment, in every experience I've had in that kind of setting, there's a lot of support to be had. There's a lot of love and there's a lot of support. If you have a success in a group of 7 girls, you have 7 girls that are supporting you and cheering you on and happy for you
>
> because they're listening with their hearts. (Participant 5)

Overall, former teen talking circle participants perceived their circle experience very positively. They spoke of how rare it is to find that support in their current life. Many of them say they have continued to stay in contact with the original members of their circle throughout all the years.

In this study, I was interested if the practice of compassionate listening had the ability to create personal transformation that empowers and motivates an individual to extend her experience to others. I was also interested to know if one might be led to practice social or spiritual activism to work towards social change and towards social justice in the world. In my own experience, this transformation occurred. From my experience attending the facilitator training workshop, I learned that my own lack of self-compassion was affecting my ability to practice compassionate listening with others. Once I took time to self-reflect on my workshop experience, I was able to re-examine my teen experiences and begin to practice self-compassion. With increased self-awareness and self-compassion, I began to practice self-acceptance. Ultimately, I felt more available to listen to myself and others and acknowledge the interconnectedness between my inner work and outer work. Doing the inner work gave me the awareness and inspiration to explore other ways I could make a positive difference in the world. Along with the need to practice self-compassion, the most meaningful insight I gained through this study was what participant five shared about compassionate listening. She said it's more about the speaker learning to listen to themselves. Listening to ourselves and practicing self-compassion are part of the inner work that needs to be done in order to do the outer work in the world.

The themes coded from the transcripts of my interviews gave substantial evidence that my own experience was neither unique nor was it transitory. The themes, in essence, reveal the lasting transformation of these former teen talking circle participants into more communicative, aware, empathetic and connected individuals. Some have gone on to call themselves activists while others do not ascribe to that label yet continue to do work to create positive effects in their lives. All of the participants continue to practice compassionate listening and reported positive changes in their relationships. Two admitted to ongoing challenges with the practice of compassionate listening and claimed that is why it is

called a *practice*. However, all seven participants believe that compassionate listening is a form of activism, whether spiritual or not, and if practiced, it can make a positive difference in the world.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Compassionate Listening Tips

- Stay Present

- Allow Silence

- Do not Try to Fix It

- Use Inquiry

- Witness Your Judgments

- Be Gentle with Yourself

- Do not Ask Why Questions

- Avoid Yes and No Questions

- Listen with Your Heart, Not Your Head

- Seek to understand the values that lie beneath the surface of a person's position.

- Humanize, rather than demonize, someone whose position differs from yours.

- Know that listening respectfully doesn't imply agreement.

- Approach dialogue with genuine curiosity, rather than with the intent of finding the flaws in another's position.

- Be willing to suspend judgment.

- Ask questions that contribute to connection rather than defensiveness or shutting down

- Use language that's not inflammatory.

- Notice and manage your triggers so you can return to being fully present with your heart as quickly as possible.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

- Please tell me how did/does compassionate listening help you individually?

- Please tell me how did/does compassionate listening change you as a listener?

- Please tell me how did/does compassionate listening change you as a speaker?

- Please tell me how did/does compassionate listening effect your interactions with others?

- Please tell me how did/does compassionate listening affect your relationships?

- Please tell me how compassionate listening helped you during your teen years?

- Does compassionate listening foster contemplation and reflection? If so, please tell me how?

- Please describe how the practice of compassionate listening promotes social change? Please provide examples.

- If you feel that compassionate listening promotes social change, please tell me how this process works. How does it change the world?

- Please tell me how compassionate listening can change society?

- Please tell me if you can how you define spiritual activism?

- Please tell me if you consider compassionate listening a form of spiritual activism and how?

- Please tell me if you can how you define social activism?

- Please tell me how you think social activism and spiritual activism are related (if at all)?

Appendix C: Facilitator's Training Schedule

- Day 1

  - Introduce one's selves: Who are you? Where did you come from? What brought you here? What are you hoping to get out of this training?

  - Short meditation

  - Talk about how to create Sacred Space and safety to be ourselves and get what we personally can out of this rare experience to be real.

  - Taking radical responsibility, check-ins, alter, candles, intensions, mention Compassionate Listening.

  - Create agreements & light candles

  - Remind people to bring photos for tomorrow

- Day 2

  - Meditation & intentions & candles

  - Check in

- Day 3

  - Ice Breakers

  - Compassionate Listening

  - Non-Violent Communication

  - Heart 2 Heart

  - Inappropriate rant

  - Our advice – before offering

  - Our experience – ask before offering

  - Use reflective listening to help them hear themselves & go deeper

  - Share our own stories

  - History of Compassionate Listening

- o   Go over tip sheet (see appendix B)

- o   Core wound defense

- o   Life raft (Facts, Feelings, Values)

- o   Practice life raft with a person

- o   Walking meditation

- o   Circle Q&A

- o   Judgment exercise

- Day 4

  - o   Check-in teen years

- Day 5

  - o   Q & A with former Teen Talking Circle participants