

## **The Practice of Council, a History as Recounted by the Elder Council of The Ojai Foundation**

Sitting in close, intimate circles, gathered around a warm fire, telling stories and sharing what's on one's mind or in one's heart has been a core practice of human culture since the dawn of time. Fortunately for us, "council" in its many names and forms, has survived through many ages and cultures. It has reawakened more compassionate, less hierarchical ways of teaching, learning, healing, and governing. Some forms of council continue, of course, as living traditions in many First Nation communities, on the mainland and in the traditional Hawaiian culture, as well as within other indigenous cultures around the world. We have learned and continue to learn from those who came before, from each other, and from our own roots and the natural world. We enter council with respect for our many teachers, gathering around the "children's fire," and listening for the call of new insights. We add our voice, contributing to council taking on new incarnations in classrooms and boardrooms, support groups and social justice initiatives, relationship intensives, men's and women's circles, spiritual centers and university programs, here and abroad, in most every country and community we visit. A common refrain we hear again and again when introducing the "practice" to those who have invited us – "Council feels like coming home."

### **A bit of the story is helpful in understanding the way of council as it has emerged for us over the years.**

In 1979, the seeds of contemporary council found fertile soil in the Upper Ojai Valley in Southern California. Dr. Joan Halifax, anthropologist and protégé of mythologist Joseph Campbell, was invited to lead a non-profit organization—known as Human Dimensions Institute/West—to explore living spiritual traditions and to study the interface between science and spirituality. (For the history of The Ojai Foundation itself, see: [www.ojaifoundation.org](http://www.ojaifoundation.org))

Situated on 40 acres of land, stewarded since 1927 by the Happy Valley Foundation (in service to a vision of theosophist Annie Besant of a new peaceful world culture), Joan renamed the non-profit organization, The Ojai Foundation (TOF). Ojai Foundation is a unique use of the word *foundation*; many have come to understand it in the spirit of *gifts to be shared*, both an old and a new kind of philanthropy. Ojai, a Chumash word (meaning "moon") is a name we use in honor of the local indigenous people and their earlier experience of what was foundational to sustainable human communities. Over the years The Ojai Foundation has come to refer to both the work and the land – a chaparral-covered ridge where beneath a majestic, 600 year-old Coastal Live Oak at its center (the Teaching Tree), Dr. Halifax convened an extraordinary and varied faculty of native elders, cutting-edge scientists, spiritual teachers, and cultural activists.

Inspired by work in the civil rights movement, trained by Quakers in non-violence and simple, heartfelt expression, and empowered by teachings with spiritual elders, Joan drew teachers and students into forms known variously as *circles of trust*, *talking-stick circles*, and *council*. With TOF hosting many seminal teachers of our time, the way of council continued to be re-discovered in varying traditions and disciplines, as well as introduced anew in others. Council was described by Zen masters as "deep listening"; it is what physician Rachel Naomi Remen calls "generous listening;" what the Quakers call "Devout Listening;" and is akin to *Indaba* – "deep talk" in South Africa. The council practice of listening and speaking from the heart became a core ingredient of TOF events and retreats.

TOF was one of the first institutions in North America to explore an ongoing dialogue/council between Tibetan and Native American spiritual leaders at the request of elders from both lineages. Several of the first retreats in America by noted peace-activist, poet, and Vietnamese Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hanh, were held at the Foundation for children, artists, environmental leaders, and Vietnam War vets. Likewise, Men's Gatherings

with poet Robert Bly and mythologist Michael Meade, and women's gatherings and conferences with teachers such as Riane Eisler and Joanna Macy, turned to council often, as a way to bring teachers and students together in learning circles. In addition, conferences on emergent topics—such as chaos theory, hospice work, ethno-botany, psycho-immunology, dream research and mind-body studies—were cross-fertilizing aspects of the Foundation's programming during the 1980s and 90s. With an intention to strengthen awareness of our interconnectedness, and witness the complementary nature of wisdom, council served as a container for circles to honor differences, find common ground and open to a “bigger story”.

Jack Zimmerman and Gigi Coyle, educators and community visionaries, collaborated with Joan in these early years, bringing their own threads of living and working in circle in different venues and cultures. They championed council as an essential way of governance at TOF, as well as further developing the practice for sharing in a variety of settings. Over a decade of working with and weaving many traditions, the Foundation evolved into a sanctuary for “council”, the name that historically has embraced a peacemaking intention. Council encourages participants to communicate in ways that lead to a heightened sense of shared purpose. Council became a time, place and practice for healing, as well as a pathway for creating and sustaining community – a sense of connection with all of life. By fostering attentive listening and authentic spontaneous expression, the practice builds trust and nurtures relationships among participants, offering an alternative to the power dynamics that can arise from inequities of status, race, economic stature, and other hierarchical structures. In the circle, everyone shares in the responsibility for guiding the process; thus the emerging group spirit, and the practice itself, becomes the primary facilitating force, with servant leaders, in supporting roles.

As it unfolded at the Foundation, the practice wove together threads of old-age circle practices and contemporary group dynamics, in an inclusive experience of council. In 1996 Jack and Gigi's work led to the writing of their book, *The Way of Council* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2009), which has since been translated into Hebrew and German, with possible Arabic, Italian, Greek and Spanish translations in the offing. As The Ojai Foundation's Staff, volunteers and Board of Directors increasingly realized the benefits of meeting in council, trainers began working with other communities, organizations and schools introducing council as a means of governance, deepening the process of learning, of healing conflicts and differences, and of co-visioning. For many, council became a way of life and a personal spiritual practice.

Over the years Jack, together with Paul Cummins, Rachel Kessler, Joe Provisor, Tom Nolan, Maureen Murdock, Ruthann Saphier, Lana Brody and many others, focused on bringing council into public and private schools and successfully introduced programs throughout Southern California and beyond. In 1996, the Palms Middle School Council Program received the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission annual award for excellence in education—the first program, rather than an individual, to be so recognized. Jack and his wife, Jaquelyn McCandless, also expanded and deepened the practice specifically for couples. This intimate relationship work continues today in various new forms. In parallel, Jack, Gigi, Marlow Hotchkiss, plus other colleagues, carried council into for-profit companies and social-profit foundations across this country and internationally as well. With guides at the School of Lost Borders, Gigi gave special attention to grounding the practice of council within rites-of-passage programs. She initiated month-long and week-long immersion council courses, such as the Nature of Council, that take place in wilderness settings, rekindling the root of council in the natural world, remembering the import of listening to all voices not only the human ones. As the circles grew and spread, participants began to understand the call to living council in our everyday lives.

In addition to the three levels of formal Council trainings that Jack and Gigi pioneered, the principles and processes of council found their way into the core of all subsequent TOF programming, from Joan's early cross-cultural pilgrimages to current ropes courses, youth rites-of-passage, adult retreats, and couples and relationship workshops. By the turn of the millennium, the practice had been shared with many teachers and facilitators who then wanted to carry it further into their own communities. Ojai trainers developed specialized courses for

therapists, guidance counselors, experiential educators, service agencies, social justice organizations and spiritual centers. To support this new growth, the Center for Council Training (CCT) was established in 1998, with the specific focus of training trainers to carry the work into schools and out into the mainstream. As well, and in response to requests coming from friends and professional colleagues in Europe and Israel, council programs expanded beyond the US. Thanks especially to the seeding of council abroad by Gigi, Jack and senior trainers Leon Berg and Marlow Hotchkiss, council was introduced and the practice developed in collaboration with communities in the Middle East, Europe, Canada, Australia and Africa.

With increasing demand for programs in a variety of arenas, most significantly for schools, both in the classroom and with parent/teacher communities, CCT divided into two primary initiatives: the Council in Schools Program and the Center for Council Practice. This individuation process began under the stewardship of “The Circle of Nine,” a diverse group of volunteer council trainers who met over the course of three years to listen to the needs and dreams of carriers of council and midwife CCT’s evolution. Expanded materials and additional guidelines were developed in support of this process and a Mentoring Council was established to help trainers thru a certification process. The Nine was facilitated by Jared Seide, who eventually became the Director of the Center for Council Practice.

In 2013, Jared as the Director of CCP initiated a process which, in June 2014, led to a spin off from TOF... Center for Council, emerged to be newly-housed under the fiscal sponsorship of Community Partners in Los Angeles. New initiatives continue to be developed, in collaboration with community-based organizations and faith-based groups, focusing on social justice issues, community-wellness and addressing reintegration of formerly incarcerated men and women, helping to assure the health and diversity of our urban communities. Today, Center for Council provides training, coaching, and support, along with council-based programming to individuals, organizations and communities.

The Trainers Mentor Council oversees certification and training of trainers throughout the US, with similar groups in Europe and Israel overseeing trainers on the path in those locations . Currently, approximately 40 certified council trainers work in programs throughout the US and Canada, along with a growing circle of trainers now empowered by our international teams and their own networks to be the leaders in their respective countries. Center for Council intends to collaborate with a number of growing international networks, such as Ma'agal Hakshava in Israel, the European Council Network, and Council teams in Africa and elsewhere.

We look forward to the practice of speaking and listening from the heart continuing to emerge in contemporary culture. We support the expansion of ever widening circles in myriad forms, with deep gratitude and respect for those who came before and for those enduring traditional cultures that continue today sitting together in circles for all of us and for the Earth.

It must be said in closing, although a number of individuals are listed above, there were many more that continue to make this work what it is. We add just a few key names from the earliest days: Elizabeth Cogburn, Robert Ott, Lola Rae Long, Larry Bramble, Leslie Roberts, Doug Adrianson, Peggy O’Brien, Win Phelps, David Jessup, Amber McIntyre, Jill Townsend, Ronit Weintraub—and we’ll stop there with a plea for forgiveness for not listing the hundreds more who have contributed to this *never ending story*.

We end in gratitude for the many partnerships forged over time, and of course for the children.

*Prepared by The Ojai Foundation Elder Council  
(Jack Zimmerman, Gigi Coyle, Marlow Hotchkiss, Leon Berg, and Lola Rae Long).*