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General Information

What is Gather to Grow?

Gather to Grow: A Cedar Valley Story Circle Project is a UNI Imagining America initiative to provide the tools and opportunities for citizens of the Cedar Valley to grow together through a shared experience of telling and listening to personal stories. This is accomplished through facilitated storytelling circles. This seed packet provides guidance for Gather to Grow Story Circle Facilitators (our Gardeners).

What is a storytelling circle?

A storytelling circle is a gathering of individuals committed to tending to their collective wellbeing through the shared telling of stories. Each person in the circle is invited to tell their own story, without interruption or comment and in turn is committed to carefully listening to the stories of others in the circle. Our particular type of story circle often ends with the group or an individual in the group creating a reflective art piece/project grounded in the full circle of stories.

Goals specific to the storytelling circle:

- Offer social support through encouraging generous community participation.
- Create a platform that is accessible and meaningful to community members.
- Build trust and familiarity, many times among strangers.
- Cultivate listening skills:
  - Participants are heard and feel heard.
  - Generate opportunity for continued reflection and connection.

The Role of Engaged Art in Gather to Grow

Generous donations from the Cedar Falls Art and Culture Board and the Center for Multicultural Education at UNI will allow Gather to Grow to begin with four pilot story circles, each involving a local artist (visual artist, poet, musician, theatre professional). Each artist will produce a publicly shared work inspired by their story circle. In the future, we hope that every story circle may result in a participant-generated art project. Art and cultural production are valued modes of expression. They are the things that move us, that aren’t merely marks on a surface, but speak directly to our hearts and humanity, and at the crux of the most powerful cultural works are stories. They are narratives that are passed down from generation to generation, experiences that are lived by the producer, and calls to the imagination for dynamic futures. What is a community without the stories of those who reside there? This community storytelling project will help to build our community’s social capital by giving a platform to a wide reach of residents in Cedar Falls and Waterloo, by encouraging a culture of deeper listening, and by archiving (with consent) and organizing stories for others to engage with outside of singular events.

Imagining America at UNI Commitment

We hope to ensure that as many perspectives and narratives are included in our project so the complex dynamics of the Cedar Valley might be further illuminated. We are working thoughtfully and intentionally to ensure equitable access to resources and networks. We are working with community partners who have experience in equitable and inclusive practices. The story circles will be held throughout the Cedar Valley with exact locations being the choice of each event host. We will assist in promoting the individual events as requested by the event host. The four pilot story circles will bring in both Cedar Falls and Waterloo artists and creatives, and public events/displays of their work will be shared with the Cedar Valley.
Dear Gardener, Seed Sower, Cultivator, Grower,

It is with gratitude and love that we share this seed packet with you in hopes that its contents will provide guidance, suggestions, and support as you cultivate your own Gather to Grow Story Circle Event in your community. The metaphor of gardening is referenced throughout this packet, and as all avid gardeners know well, there are constant variables to adapt to, so consider this an introductory guide, knowing that you understand best the needs of your participants.

The Cedar Valley has always reflected the complex range of joy and despair embedded in our national social fabric, and we share in the very human desire to find community with each other in order to heal, educate, and motivate positive change. Gather to Grow’s goals are to give voice to historic and contemporary experiences of those who reside in Waterloo and Cedar Falls, to archive those stories with consent, and to engage the arts in larger community dialogue as powerful modes of public expression and generous participation.

Your story circles will contribute to an ever-evolving culture of storytelling and deep listening in the Cedar Valley where we learn from each other and call on one another to do the work of growing justice and cultivating equity locally and globally. We also honor the arts as additional ways to communicate with one another towards a better understanding of the social landscape, and we encourage you to consider how you might infuse the arts into your event or engage the arts following your event as a public platform for what was heard and what needs to be shared.

Cultivation is messy, and it is from continuous decomposition that anything truly good grows. Even if you follow all of the directions in this seed packet, things may not go as planned. There will be unforeseen challenges. You may experience frustration and setbacks along the way. As you dig deeper, things will inevitably become harder to work through. As the subsoil is exposed, you must work extra care with your participants and yourself. Continue to listen to each other, even when met with the most seemingly impenetrable bedrock, and proceed bravely with kindness and generosity. This is not a process that will provide clear answers, and actually may create more questions. Life’s work is not about prioritizing the finite; instead, it values how we grow with each other, for each other, and because of each other.

Let’s continue to gather, listen, and grow together.

Imagining America at UNI’s Gather to Grow Team
Racial Equity Storytelling Prompts

The selection of story prompts and their order will have a dynamic effect upon the conversation. You may, of course, create your own story prompts customized to your audience, or you may use the prompts provided here. These prompts are specifically selected to allow for conversations about race, identity, intersectionality, and equity.

We recommend you begin your story circle with 3 prompts, ideally selecting one prompt from each category: planting, nurturing, and cultivating. Encourage participants to share one personal story inspired by any of the selected prompts.

Warm Up Prompts:
(participants answer with 1 or 2 sentences, used for practice)
☞ What inspires hope in you?
☞ What does community mean to you?

Planting the seeds:
☞ Share a story about a moment or experience that fundamentally impacted the way you look at the world.
☞ Share a story about your earliest memory of facing or coming in contact with discrimination.

Nurturing Conversation:
☞ Share a story about what makes you feel secure or insecure in your daily life.
☞ Share a story about a time when you realized your thoughts/beliefs were different from your parents/community.

Cultivating Prompt:
☞ Share a story about a time when you felt community.
☞ Share a story about a time when your differences were your strength (or weakness).
☞ Share a story about a time you felt seen or heard.
Tending the Garden: Planning and Customizing your Event

In this video, Imagining America member and UNI Communication and Media professor, Danielle McGeough provides guidance about how to decide why and who to gather.

Why: Decide why you are gathering—commit to a bold and strong purpose.

The goals outlined at the start of this packet should provide you with some guidance as you commit to your purpose; however, you may choose to create your own purpose for your particular storytelling circle.

To do this:

• Give your group a name and write a description detailing the mission of the group. (For example: Gather to Grow The CME’s Storytelling Circle for Healing from Racial Trauma).

• Make the purpose of your gathering specific, unique, and disputable. Three strategies for doing this are:
  - Ask why you’re doing it. Every time you get to another deeper reason, ask why again. You may use the worksheet at the end of this section to develop a why that is up to seven layers deep.
  - Ask: What are the larger needs in the world/community for your gathering to address?
  - Reverse engineer an outcome: Think of what you want to be different because you gathered, and work backward from that outcome (Parker, 2019).

Who: Decide on the size of your gathering as well as who you will invite to your gathering.

Recommendations regarding size:

• Eight to twelve people is an optimum number to engender a lively and inclusive conversation.

• Storytelling circles with twelve to twenty people still allow you to build trust and intimacy.

Who to invite to your gathering:

• Consider your purpose. Invite people who will help you fulfill the gathering’s purpose.

• A few notes on exclusion:
  - Thoughtful exclusion helps clarify the purpose of your gathering and communicates to guests the importance of the purpose.
  - When explaining to people why they aren’t invited, go to your purpose. A purpose is not personal.
  - Good exclusion activates diversity. In her book, The Art of Gathering, Priya Parker explains: “Diversity needs to be activated. It can be used or it can just be there” (p. 45).

Where/How: In this video, Dr. McGeough discusses face-to-face versus virtual settings and how to make the most of where you host your story circle. Decide whether the gathering will be face-to-face or a virtual gathering.

If face-to-face, consider where you will gather. Choose spaces and locations that resonate with your deeper goals. Consider these aspects of a the space.

• Perimeter: Gatherings need perimeters. A contained space for gathering allows people to relax, and it helps create the alternative world that a gathering can, at its best, achieve.

• Area: The size of a gathering’s space should serve your purpose. A space that is too large or too small will make your participants uncomfortable.
If your gathering is virtual, consider how to create a sense of place within the virtual setting. Many of the tips for creating meaningful face-to-face gatherings also apply to virtual gatherings. Here are a few tips specific to virtual gatherings:

- Prior to the gathering, send participants an email that clearly states expectations for participation as well as some basic information about the platform used. (Example: We will mute participants unless they are speaking).
- Encourage people to keep their video on. Set this expectation prior to the meeting. Sometimes, however, participants have to turn off their video due to weak Internet connectivity or for privacy reasons. Make “video on” the expectation and check in individually with those who might be having connectivity issues. For those with privacy issues, you may provide ideas about how to maintain privacy: face the camera toward a wall or provide instructions on how to change the Zoom background.
- Whatever virtual platform you use, provide instructions to help participants set their desired name. You may wish to ask all participants to set only a first name or invite participants to include their preferred pronouns, neighborhood, or other information after their name.
- Consider playing music to set the tone before the storytelling circle begins.
- Have a set of questions that invite casual conversation before the gathering begins. (Example: Tell me a highlight of your day).

When: Considering when to host is as important as where and how. Select a time that will work best for the desired participants.

- How will the choice of when the gathering takes place affect who participates?
- Who will be at work at this time?
- Who will have church or community obligations?
- Can pairing your gathering with another event increase access? For example, could more working mothers participate if the event were to take place as a part of a school function?

Citations

Seven Layers of Why specific, unique, and disputable Purpose

Instructions: Begin by answering the first question, Why are you hosting this story circle? Then, with your answer in mind, ask why is this important? You do not need to go all seven layers deep. Keep asking why until you have reached a purpose that is specific, unique and disputable.

**Why have you decided to host this story circle?**

**Why is this important?**

And why is that important?

And why is that important?

And why is that important?

And why is that important?

And why is that important?
Fertilizing the soil: Promoting your Story Circle Event

Now that you have figured out the specifics of your event and have a strong foundation, it is time to consider if you want to promote it and why, how to promote it, who to promote it to, and where!

Promotion may be useful to:

- Encourage participation through a more open invitation in addition to personally reaching out to individuals (this may not be necessary if you are planning an event for a group that you already know, such as a community group you belong to).
- Encourage others to follow your lead and host their own story circle.
- Share what you are doing in collaboration with Gather to Grow and as part of a storytelling movement in the Cedar Valley.

Promotion Tips

Know Your Audience: Stop and think about who you want to be a part of your storytelling circle. Who is your target audience? If there is a certain demographic you are targeting, make sure that it is clear in all your communications. If you want to host a general storytelling circle where anyone can sign up, make that clear as well! (See the section on types of storytelling circles for more information.)

Be clear and concise: Regardless of which communication channels you are using to promote your event, start by explaining what a storytelling circle is and be very clear about what you want the audience to do in response to your message. Make sure that all the basic information about the purpose of the event, location, time, and most importantly, how to sign up is clearly communicated.

Reminders: Even if you have been promoting your storytelling circle for weeks in advance, you might see a surge of interest in a couple of days leading up to it. Make sure that you harness this interest and share frequent reminders in the last few days before the event on all the social media channels that you have been using.

Methods of Promotion:

Community Poster: Another way to recruit participants is to prepare a flier or poster for display in local businesses, at churches, and in community centers. If your audience is unlikely to see events posted online, then posters strategically placed within the community are another option. Make your own poster or edit this template.

Newsletter Story: Newsletter stories can be used to recruit participants and to share the outcomes of a story circle. A recruitment story should include who, what, where, when, and how to register.

Social Media: Using social media can be a way to reach potential participants with minimal effort. Put the word out through your social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Facebook is a popular platform to promote events as the interface allows you to Create an Event and populate the event page with details and information about your Storytelling Circle. Find more information on how to create events on Facebook here. On Instagram, you can use the story feature to host AMA (Ask Me Anything) sessions, share tidbits about storytelling circles, and get your audience interested!
Email: Resist the urge to blast everyone in your contact lists with the same email announcing your event. Instead, segment them under categories like people you want to invite to the Storytelling Circle, people who could help spread the word, and people who could help you get to the audience you want to invite. Then work on unique communication texts for each category. Another way to promote an event through email is to add it to your sign-off. If appropriate, add a line to your sign-off that says “Storytelling Circle Host” and hyperlink it to a page where anyone who clicks on it can find more information, sign up, etc.

Personal Blog: If you have a personal blog or website, don’t be shy about using it to publicize your event. This is especially important if you update the blog/website frequently and have a loyal audience (even if it’s small!)

Hashtags: Create a short hashtag for the event and use it wherever possible, especially on Twitter and Instagram. You can also use hashtags on printed material. It could be something as simple as #bobsstorytellingcircle, #gathertogrow, or #unig2g. Be creative! Hashtags, when used repeatedly in the same context, help anchor your event and enhance its recall value. (However, don’t overdo it! Limit your hashtag usage to one or two hashtags for your event.)

Sources: https://www.eventbrite.com/blog/creative-event-promotion-ideas-ds0q/
https://billetto.co.uk/l/how-to-promote-an-event
You are invited to tell your story!

Gather to Grow: A Cedar Valley Story Circle Project

When: DATE, START TIME-END TIME

Where: PLACE NAME, ADDRESS

Register: LINK OR REGISTRATION INFORMATION

Gather to Grow: A Cedar Valley Story Circle Project is a UNI Imagining America initiative to provide the tools and opportunities for citizens of the Cedar Valley to grow together through shared experiences telling and listening to personal stories through facilitated storytelling circles. Gather to Grow participants will join together in fellowship to tell and listen to each others personal stories. Your host will provide a story prompt and provide time for every person to tell their story without interruption. Through this process, the Cedar Valley will grow together as individuals are valued and heard. Learn more about Gather to Grow here: https://engagement.uni.edu/imaging-america/gather-grow
Gathering - How to Host a Story Circle

The Welcome:
Plan how you will transition people into the gathering:

- Greet participants as they arrive and invite them into the space, ensuring that all feel welcome.

For an in-person event:
- Arrange participants in an equal circle ensuring that there are no physical barriers, like tables, in the middle.

For a virtual event:
- Instruct participants to use gallery view so that everyone is seen at the same time and the same size.

- Once everyone has arrived, invite participants to introduce themselves. You may ask them each to share what attracted them to participate.

Opening the circle:
Set the tone:

The story circle is designed to be a supportive space for giving and receiving, for learning from one another so that we may shape a shared understanding of the rich complexities that exist within our community. Be fully present in this space, whether you are sharing your story or listening to the stories of others. To listen deeply is a generous and generative act that builds trust and opens possibilities for creating connection. The goal is for all participants to \textit{be heard and feel heard}. \textit{Model this by Maintaining focus on the storyteller, rather than thinking ahead to the details of your own story. This will open possibilities for rich, organic intersections between stories.}

Set the rules:
Read this section to your participants or otherwise guide them with the purpose, direction, and ground rules.

- Stories will be based on a prompt or question provided by the host at the start of the story circle. The expectation is that stories are unrehearsed and told organically and from the heart without the use of notes.
- Stories will be shared back to back, without any comments or questions during or between. There will be time after all stories are told for an open, reflective dialogue.
- A story is based on one’s own authentic, unique experience and can come from anywhere – a memory, a dream, a reflection, an encounter. A story is \textit{not rhetoric, opinions or analysis, all of which should be avoided.}
- Because stories come from one’s own experience, that person alone is the expert. Listeners, be open and curious, refraining from judgement or the urge to fix, save, advise, or correct.
- Engage in active, deep listening – Connect with the storyteller through eye contact and body language; Be present with a story, absorbing the details and nuances; Take time to reflect and assimilate during the silent pause between each story.
- Storytelling is a powerful way to connect with others, but it also requires a willingness to be vulnerable and exposed. Therefore, building trust in a story circle requires a promise to respect the privacy of all participants. Unless permission to share is granted by the storyteller, stories themselves remain in the circle. The lessons learned from the collective story circle experience are what may be taken away.
Equalize your guests:

- Give each person the same amount of time to share their story. If someone is not ready when their turn comes, allow them to ‘pass’ and tell their story at the end of the circle.

Cultivate Connection:

- A warm-up story serves two purposes: a) To model the expectations and logistics of the experience and b) To allow an opportunity for participants to become familiar and comfortable with each other.
- For this exercise, the host introduces a prompt such as “What inspires hope in you?” Participants are then called upon to offer a brief response (just a few sentences). Pause for reflection between each story just as for the actual story circle.

Host plants the first seed:

- After the warm-up story circle, share your story.
- The host’s story matters because group members will follow the host’s lead and will be more comfortable trusting the group once the host has done so.

The circle grows, the storytelling:

- Pause for a few moments after telling your opening story. Then remind the group of the prompt and go around the circle, giving each person the same amount of time to answer the prompt.
- Ideally, the circle will consist of three rounds, each with a different story prompt. If you are using the provided prompts, the first story prompt is an introduction, the second a provocation, and the third a call to hope.
  - Rotate the starting position in the circle so that the same participant is relied upon to always go first, or allow participants to volunteer an order. You may choose to take a slightly longer pause or even a break between prompts.
  - Pause for a few moments between storytellers but do not comment or invite conversation.
  - If participants want to talk, remind them that there will be time at the end.
  - If a participant needs to pass, come back to them at the end of the round or when they are ready.

Closing your gathering:

How to transition people out of the gathering:

How you end your story circles will shape people’s experiences, sense of meaning, and memory of the experience.

- After everyone has had an opportunity to share their story, take a moment to sit in reflection.
- Then, sincerely express your gratitude for people’s willingness to share their stories.
- Let your guests know that there are two, short closing activities and then the gathering will come to a close.

Closing Activity 1, Catch and Store:

This is a way to acknowledge and reflect on the stories shared.

- Ask participants to describe, in one sentence, what this gathering has done for their awareness and relationship to the people in the room.
- Again, anyone may pass if they are not ready to share when it is their turn.
Closing Activity 2, Sharing the Surplus:
Prepare to part and consider how you will share what you have learned.

For an in-person event:
- Ask participants to fill out a commitment card. Allow 5-7 minutes for completion.

For a virtual event:
- Ask participants to take 5-7 minutes to write on a piece of paper three actions they plan to take inspired by the stories shared. This may happen on or off-line.

Sprout: How will this gathering continue to grow
- Share with participants opportunities for future involvement, including inviting participants to host their own circles (https://engagement.uni.edu/imaging-america/gather-grow).
- For example, if there are plans for an artist to create a mural inspired by the stories, please let participants know how they can participate and/or view the artwork. If there are upcoming events in the community that might be of interest to the group, please share those events at this time.

Exit line:
Finally, close the event by sharing a quotation, poem, or taking a deep breath as a group.

Tips for Gather to Grow Hosts—Group Dynamics
Hosts will want to keep in mind that most groups will work through stages of development as they meet together and share their stories. Typically, groups work through the following:
- **Forming:** At this stage individuals will get to know the leader and one another through self-disclosure and listening to others. Oftentimes the leader and group members identify some ground rules or agreements about the environment they want to create.
- **Transition:** Many times it is very normal for groups to progress through transition stages. During this stage, group members may share their differences of opinions and work through various types of resistance. During this stage it is important to listen to all points of view and continue to create a safe space for sharing.
- **Ending:** When the group comes to a close, it is important to discuss what each member learned from participating in the group and how they can take what they have learned and apply it to the larger community. In Gather to Grow Story circles, this is accomplished through commitment cards, written reflections, and creation of artist expressions of the event.

In addition to group communication, the group leader can use the more specific skills of active listening and blocking. **Active listening** involves nonverbal engagement and tuning into what the other group members are sharing. Leaders often must model this behavior to help group members settle in to truly listen to one another. **At times if there is a disruptive member of the group or someone who continues to dominate the conversation, the skill of blocking may be needed. It can be as simple as asking the dominating member to hold on to their thoughts as others share their thoughts first.**

Various factors operate in groups that do not operate in one-on-one communication. As a leader, by taking advantage of these naturally occurring phenomena, groups can become more cohesive and productive. Some of these factors that may operate in the storytelling circles include the **sense of universality** and **not feeling alone in one’s struggle** and an **instillation of hope** that by sharing their stories that we will see change and improvement in our communities. As part of these groups, members may experience interpersonal learning and increased meaning and existential awareness of the impact of their stories.

By being aware of the group dynamics that typically operate in groups, leaders are able to create safe, productive spaces for sharing and self discovery.

Tips for Virtual Story Circle Hosting
Many virtual platforms may be used to host a virtual story circle. If you are not already familiar with a platform, Zoom is a simple, easy, and secure hosting platform Here are some tips and guidelines to help you host your Storytelling Circle on Zoom.
If you don’t already have an account, sign up for a free Zoom account.

1. Open the Zoom application on your device.
2. Click on Schedule.
3. Enter the required details: topic (Event title), start time & duration, and time zone.
4. Generate the meeting ID automatically to protect your personal Zoom room ID.
5. Set a passcode to keep your meeting safe and secure for your participants.
6. Click on Advanced Options and check to see that “Mute participants upon entry” is set.
7. You may also assign alternative hosts. Alternative hosts can assist you with muting and unmuting participants during the event. An alternative host can also monitor the chat and assist with technical issues.
8. Click Save.

If you selected to connect the event to an outlook or Google calendar, then the calendar application will automatically open and generate a calendar event with the Zoom invitation and login information included. You can invite participants to the calendar event. If you selected “other calendar,” then an event invitation with login information will open in a pop-up window. Click the copy to clipboard button and then paste the invitation into emails or another document.

To protect your participants and event, do not share the meeting link, ID, or password on a platform where it can be accessed publicly. For example, do not post the details to a Facebook page or on other social media. Instead invite participants through individual emails/calendar invitations or ask participants to register in order to receive login information. However, if you have a closed Facebook group or chat which you use to communicate with participants, sharing the zoom invitation will only go to group members.

Click on this link for more information about hosting an event.
Divide and Transplant: Harvesting Ideas from Your Story Circle

Story circles are powerful precisely because of the human connections that are made; because of the opportunity to tell a personal story and to be heard; because of the expansiveness that is created when we listen deeply to another’s lived experience. The story circle provides a brief but potentially transformative encounter – the nutrient-rich soil in which the garden will grow. Facilitators should be prepared to offer additional key ingredients to maintain a healthy, flourishing garden beyond the scope of the story circle itself.

These might include:

- **A Resource List** – these could be books, articles, websites, podcasts, local or national organizations, etc. that are related to the story circle topic and will provide additional opportunities to learn and become engaged. You may choose to make this a living document that can be added to by participants once the story circle is concluded.

- **Contact List** – participants may be invited, but not required, to share their contact information to be distributed by the facilitator to all participants. This will provide an avenue for participants to continue exploring the topic together.

- **Group Reflection** – at the conclusion of the story circle, participants may be asked to reflect on key learnings from the experience and collectively generate a list of potential action steps.

- **Commitment Cards** – participants may be asked to write an action goal for themselves that can be taken as a reminder of the experience.

- **Creative Manifestation** – the essence of the stories shared (with permission of the participants) and the resulting collective understanding can be transformed into an artistic rendering to be shared with a wider audience. For example:
  - **Word Cloud** – Participants are given 30 seconds to quickly write as many words as possible to describe the feelings, thoughts, understandings brought up by the story circle. These are then compiled by the facilitator into a Word Cloud by using an online source like wordclouds.com or wordart.com.
  - **Haiku** – Participants use their reflection points to create a Haiku. An example handout for this exercise is included in this packet.
  - **Visual Art** – A rendering that depicts a vision for the future.

**Story Circle Haiku**

*Haiku:* Japanese poetry form that uses just a few words to capture a moment and create a picture in the reader’s mind.

**Traditional:** Three lines with 5/7/5 syllable count.

**Characteristics:** Often focus on nature, which could be expanded to include human nature; reference to time (e.g., snow); use of provocative, colorful images that evoke a feeling; able to be read in one breath; sense of sudden enlightenment and illumination.

**Example:**

Sun-powered school days  
Crunch of local apples fuel  
Imaginations.

In the space below, transform the ideas from your story circle experience into a haiku.
Gather to Grow: A Cedar Valley Story Circle Project is a community engagement project of the University of Northern Iowa Imagining America.

Learn more: https://engagement.uni.edu/imaging-america