HUMAN FLOURISHING CIRCLES

Between Fear and Love

When fear enters a conversation that matters, what becomes possible if someone chooses love instead?

About This Circle

Some conversations close almost as soon as they begin.

Someone says something that lands wrong. A tone shifts. Defensiveness rises. Before we fully understand what is happening, fear is already shaping the room.

This Circle is about that moment.

Fear is not the enemy. It is part of how human beings protect what matters. But fear can also narrow our vision, harden our certainty, and make it harder to stay curious, honest, and connected when a conversation becomes difficult.

Between Fear and Love explores a different possibility: that even when fear is present, it does not have to decide everything that follows. One person can slow the moment, ask a better question, set a clearer boundary, or choose not to return contempt for contempt. That choice may not change the outcome entirely, but it can change what becomes possible in the room.

What you might bring to this conversation

You might think about:

- a conversation that escalated faster than you expected
- a relationship where fear has been deciding too much
- a moment when you felt misunderstood, defensive, or on alert
- a time someone responded with steadiness and changed the direction of the room
- a situation where love looked less like niceness and more like honesty, courage, or a boundary

Inside this Circle Kit

THE SHORT READ

Share it with participants several days before the Circle. Print a few extra copies for the gathering.

THE CONVERSATION CARD

Print one for each participant. Print double-sided, flip on the long edge, then cut down the center.

THE HOST SHEET

Read it once before people arrive and keep it nearby during the conversation.

Between Fear and Love

CIRCLE HOST SHEET

For five to ten people | about 90 minutes | no expertise required

YOUR ROLE

You are not expected to teach the reading, resolve disagreement, or guide participants toward a particular conclusion.

Welcome the group. Ask the questions. Make room for different voices. Protect the agreements.

That is enough.

BEFORE THE CIRCLE

- Send The Short Read several days beforehand.
- Let participants know they are welcome even if they do not read it in advance.
- Print extra copies of The Short Read.
- Print one Conversation Card for each person.
- Arrange the seats so everyone can see one another.
- Read The Short Read and this sheet once before people arrive.
- Plan to protect the final fifteen minutes for the closing round.

Give everyone five quiet minutes to read or revisit The Short Read before beginning.

A SIMPLE FLOW

5 - 10 min	15 - 20 min	45 - 50 min	15 min	5 min
Read or revisit	Welcome + opening round	Open conversation	Closing round	Invitation + thanks

BEGIN THE CIRCLE

1 Welcome the group

Briefly explain that a Circle is a small gathering around a shared reading and a question that matters; the purpose is honest conversation and careful listening, not agreement; invite people to speak from their own experience. Keep this brief and use your own words.

2 Review the agreements

- Listen to understand.
- Speak from your own experience.
- Disagreement is welcome; contempt and personal attack are not.
- Respect what is shared personally. Anyone may pass.

Clarify that the opening and closing rounds have no cross-talk or advice; the open conversation allows natural exchange, one person at a time; personal stories stay private. Ask if anyone has questions.

3 Opening round

Ask the opening question:

> **What stayed with you, surprised you, or made you resist?**

Answer first. Keep your response brief, honest, and unpolished.

Then invite each person to respond in turn. Remind the group that anyone may pass.

Do not respond to individual answers or begin discussing them yet; let each contribution stand.

Leading the Conversation

BETWEEN FEAR AND LOVE

Use the questions on the Conversation Card as options, not a checklist. Choose the ones that seem most useful to the room. The questions follow a natural movement:

Notice	Choose	Open	Remember
How fear affects people and the rooms they share	Where meaningful choice remains	What might make something more possible	Evidence that people and communities can change

You do not need to announce these stages or give them equal time. Try not to let the entire conversation remain focused on what is wrong.

HELP THE CONVERSATION STAY USEFUL

IF THE DISCUSSION BECOMES ABSTRACT

Bring it back to lived experience. Ask what participants have personally seen or noticed in themselves.

IF FEW PEOPLE ARE CARRYING THE CONVERSATION

Invite voices that have not yet been heard. Do not pressure anyone to speak.

IF SOMEONE SHARES SOMETHING PAINFUL

Acknowledge it without counseling, analyzing, or pressing for more details. Allow a pause.

IF LOVE BEGINS TO MEAN NICENESS

Ask whether honesty, conflict, refusal, or a firm boundary could be the more loving response.

IF THE ROOM AGREES THAT NOTHING CAN CHANGE

Do not argue for optimism. Ask whether anyone has seen even a partial exception, even on a small scale.

IF POLITICAL EXAMPLES ARISE

Allow them, but keep the discussion grounded in experience rather than party debate.

LET SILENCE WORK: A pause may mean people are thinking or letting something settle. You do not need to fill every silence.

CLOSING ROUND

Begin with about fifteen minutes remaining. Ask:

Think of one real conversation, relationship, or room in which fear has been deciding too much. What is one choice you can make next? What gives you reason to believe that step may be worth taking?

Invite each person to respond in turn. Anyone may pass. Answer the question yourself. Do not invite advice, evaluate anyone's choice, or ask participants to report back later.

1 Invite the next Circle

Say something like: *"This happened because someone picked a topic, printed a few pages, and invited people over. That's the whole structure. Who here might want to host the next one?"* Allow silence: the invitation can stay open.

2 Close the gathering

Thank everyone for what they brought. Point briefly to the full essay, the Pledge, another Circle, or hosting. Use your own words; no formal speech is required.

3 Afterward

Send a brief thank-you. Do not summarize what people shared or hold anyone publicly accountable. Invite participants to share feedback using the QR code. It helps us make the next Circle better.

Between Fear and Love

THE SHORT READ

When fear enters a conversation that matters, what becomes possible if someone chooses love instead?

Almost everyone has watched one person change the direction of a conversation by how they responded.

They asked a question they actually wanted answered. They stayed steady when the moment invited escalation. They told the truth without trying to wound. The room did not become perfect, and no one necessarily changed sides. But something opened that had been closing.

Most of us have lived the opposite experience too. A conversation matters. Someone says something that lands wrong. The chest tightens. Heat rises in the face. Before the mind has fully understood what happened, something in us has gone on alert.

The Human Flourishing Pledge puts the contrast plainly:

> *Fear contracts, divides, and diminishes.*
> *Love creates, connects, and elevates.*

That sounds simple. Living it is not.

Fear is doing its job

Fear is not the enemy. It is part of the equipment that has kept human beings alive.

Our threat-detection systems react quickly, before conscious thought has had time to weigh the evidence. Attention narrows. The body prepares to defend, escape, freeze, or appease. Under stress, some of the brain functions involved in working memory, flexible problem-solving, inhibition, and nuanced judgment become harder to access.

That is useful when a child steps toward a busy road. It is less useful when the danger is a tone of voice, a difficult email, a political opinion, or a sentence from someone we love.

Imagine placing your hand on a hot stove. You pull it away before you have time to decide. The alarm fires, the body responds, and the danger passes.

Now imagine leaving your hand there. The warning keeps firing. You study the heat, rehearse the burn, and return to it over and over while the damage deepens.

We do something similar after charged conversations. We replay the comment. Rewrite the reply. Gather more evidence that we were right. Lie awake running the exchange again, each repetition adding heat to an injury the original moment is no longer causing.

The alarm designed to protect us becomes the thing that keeps hurting us.

Two hands on the stove

Bring another person into the picture. Two people enter a conversation that matters. Both are already carrying some fear: fear of being dismissed, blamed, controlled, misunderstood, exposed, or asked to give up something important.

One person hears an attack. Their response becomes slightly sharper. The other person detects the change and becomes more defended. Within a few exchanges, both are inside a conversation neither intended to have.

The couple is no longer talking about money; they are defending their worth. The colleagues are no longer solving the problem; they are protecting their credibility. The community is no longer investigating what happened; its members are sorting one another into sides.

Two hands. One stove. Each person's alarm confirming the other's. And here is what makes the cycle difficult to recognize:

> *The fear brain does not experience itself as fear. It experiences itself as clarity.*

Fear feels like finally seeing the situation as it really is. Narrowing feels like focus. Certainty feels like strength. The loss of curiosity can feel like the end of naiveté. The person across from us may seem rigid, unreasonable, and incapable of hearing evidence.

They may be experiencing us exactly the same way.

The signal is pointing somewhere

The fear signal is not meaningless. Something matters here. A relationship. A value. A sense of dignity. The safety of someone we love. A future we believe is at risk. The problem is not that the signal fired. The problem is allowing the alarm to write the response. Fear can get our attention. It cannot necessarily tell us what to do next.

Taking a hand off the stove creates enough space to ask a better question: **What is this fear trying to protect?**

That question does not guarantee agreement. It may reveal that the danger is real. It may lead to a difficult truth, a firm refusal, a boundary, distance, or the decision to leave.

Love does not mean affection, niceness, passivity, or unlimited access to us. It does not require anyone to remain in a relationship or situation that is coercive, abusive, threatening, or unsafe.

Taking a hand off the stove is not surrender. It is a change in how we meet the moment, not necessarily a change in what we believe.

What one person can change

A person cannot control the nervous system across the table. They cannot guarantee repair, persuade someone who is unwilling to listen, or make every relationship safe. But their choice does not remain entirely inside them. A slower pace, a softer tone, a genuine question, or a refusal to return contempt for contempt changes the signals moving through the room. It gives the other person less heat to react to. Sometimes the other person follows. Sometimes they do not. Either way, one person has recovered the freedom to choose how they will participate.

> *That is the beginning of agency—not control over the outcome, but the recognition that fear has not erased every choice.*

And sometimes the result becomes evidence. A conversation goes better than expected. A person we had reduced to a label surprises us. Two people remain in relationship without resolving the disagreement. A group discovers that it can tell the truth without destroying itself.

No single moment proves that every conflict can be healed. It does challenge the belief that nothing can change, that other people are unreachable, and that our own choices are too small to matter.

The hand can come off the stove. Not forever, and maybe not perfectly. But in this conversation, in this room, in the next moment when the alarm fires.

A woman in a doorway

A woman comes home after a long day and finds her teenage son furious about something that happened at school. He is ready to fight the first person who looks at him wrong. Her first instinct is to match his heat. She can feel herself tightening as she walks toward him. Instead, she stops in the doorway. Takes a breath. Puts down her bag. Then she sits across from him and asks what happened.

He had been prepared to yell. But something in her voice changes the room. His shoulders drop. Within minutes, the anger gives way to the hurt underneath it. Nothing about what happened at school has changed. Everything about what is possible in the living room has. She did not persuade him or fix the problem. She changed what she brought into the room—and gave him more room to choose what he brought next.

> *The question is not whether fear will appear. It will. The question is what becomes possible when fear is present, but does not get to decide everything that follows.*

THE QUESTION FOR THE CIRCLE

What stayed with you, surprised you, or made you resist?

Adapted from the Human Flourishing essay: Fear Is Not the Enemy. Love Is Not a Feeling. *by Scott McIntosh and Angela McIllece*

HUMAN
FLOURISHING

CONVERSATION CARD

Between Fear and Love

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OPENING REFLECTION

From The Short Read, what stayed with you, surprised you, or made you resist?

OUR AGREEMENTS

1. Listen to understand.
2. Speak from your own experience.
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SHARE FEEDBACK

Tell us about your Circle experience. What worked well? What didn't? What should we know? Please share feedback using the QR code. It will help make the next Circle better.

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Questions for Our Conversation

NOTICE

1. How do you know when fear has entered a conversation?
2. What does fear make you want to do—and what becomes harder to see?

CHOOSE

3. Where does some choice remain, even when you cannot control the other person or the outcome?
4. Have you ever taken your hand off the stove in the middle of a conversation? What changed?

OPEN

5. What question, boundary, apology, pause, or invitation could open a situation even slightly?
6. Where could you begin without waiting for the other person to change first?

REMEMBER WHAT IS POSSIBLE

7. When has a difficult conversation gone better than you expected?
8. Where have you seen people work across real disagreement without first resolving it?

CLOSING REFLECTION

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