

Going Around in Circles

*Will the circle
be unbroken?
old gospel tune*

One of the things I understand the least about teaching drumming to children is a set of interlocking puzzles or blockages that keep children from fully experiencing the joy of it. Getting into the groove means being happy recycling a pattern over and over, going around in circles with other people as it gets groovier and groovier. But some children who “get it” very quickly become bored or annoyed with it just as quickly. Other children struggle and struggle to “get it” and when they finally get into just a bit of a groove -- the thrill comes, they light up, and then it is gone almost immediately! Somehow it is possible, for both the quick and the very slow, to “get it,” have a breakthrough, get in synch, glow with satisfaction, feel some of what is possible, and then just stand up and walk away from it.

Or they keep drumming and run off with it! Some of the best 5 or 6 year old drummers “get it” immediately and then say something to themselves like “is that all there is?” or “so what?” or “mission accomplished,” “challenge met,” and then “lets do it faster and faster, maybe that will keep me interested.” Another drum teacher, Greg Mosely, calls it “happy hands,” hands with a life or mind of their own that want to add more beats, go faster, do anything but settle into a steady pattern that grooves and is danceable. They can feel some of the power and joy of a) playing a part in synch with other people, and b) holding a part with other people so that another part can be interlocked which enhances the groove and enhances the circle, but somehow it is not enough; or getting deeper and deeper into “it” is threatening in ways I can’t imagine, or . . .

Let me attempt a complex guess or indiscrete hypothesis: children who “get the skill and get the thrill” but don’t seem to know what to do with the thrill as a sustaining force or suffusing joy of participation, may be so “linear minded”

or so “goal directed”

or so “afraid of present time”

or so “discursive” that they can’t be “recursive”

or so “into knowing that they can’t just BE”

or so “used to turning expectations into disappointments and resentments” that another way of being in the world is frightening, or . . .

Are you experiencing an expectation personally and/or from the whole group that “the groove” will get bigger and better if only you will continue to participate in it? Head for a neutral corner of the room, head for the door, get me out of this. A felt pressure to be responsive and responsible instant by instant in time and thru time can feel oppressive to children trained for, or used to, different kinds of autonomy. There are so many different ways to be autonomous or isolated, as many ways as there are humans! But, in the moment, in a group, there is just one way for that one person to be **in** that particular groove. I think we all need this participation (or togetherness, or socialization, or solidarity, or the conviviality of being-an-energized-and-important-part-of-a-

functioning-group we have lots of good words for this so it must be important) but, not everyone wants participation in the USA today.

In the opening sections of Ken Aigen's book (Playin' in the Band) -- and you can see it on the DVD in the back of that book -- I remember the hero of the story heading for the door the minute a groove or music-to-be-into was offered to him. To be "hooked up" and "interacting with timing" and losing part of your self to the whole can be scary. Very scary to the very disabled. Not a joy at all.

At this point we could give a paragraph or chapter or even a book of speculation to each possible obstacle as named or labeled above, add more labels to the list diagnoses and acronyms (like ADD for "attention deficit disorder" or "adapted to dreary dullness") and check for overlaps -- what does "linearity" or "goal directedness" or "control" or "discursive thinking" or "knowing" or "expectation-disappointment-resentment" have to do with the spectrum of "autistic" behaviors or both kinds of "ADD"? -- but I think our best strategies for getting into the groove and staying there with every child have to rely on "not thinking" and "just doing it." I remember my co-teacher Liz on her knees pleading with one very verbal child who seemed at the brink of giving up on the process, "stop thinking about it and stop talking about it and just do it!" If grooving is recursive, recycling, going around in circles, creating feedback loops, dancing in circles, being in a drum circle, dancing for drummers, drumming for dancers, then let's keep doing it and hoping for the best. A discourse or discursive approach, a well thought out speech e.g. about the thrill of drumming for dancers, is probably not going to be as convincing or engaging as the attraction of action: being thrilled as you yourself drum with others for dancers. As a teacher or mentor I keep praying for "contagious magic" and I try to be into the energy of Blake's "eternal delight." I know that "keeping together in time" is something that we humans can do well and enjoy doing. It really helps to be a team of 2 or 3 or more teachers/players so that the groove keeps going, the circle remains unbroken, for most of the time that you're with the children.

And it helps to know that going around in circles is good for us. Whenever I get worried that the "quick ones" are getting bored with the little bit of groove that we have, or the "slow ones" don't really want to groove with as much groove as we have got, I keep faith with the traditions: a lot of Puerto Rican salseros have danced to exhaustion with this beat *when it's done right*; millions of Brazilians find this bass drum pulse irresistible *in combination with other parts at mardi gras time*; Tiv kids would have no problem staying in this circle *because they have seen expert dancing adults attract future husbands and wives this way*; any Yoruba would want to chant over these triplet rhythms *because the gods would be pleased*; so kids at Salisbury Central will love and maintain these traditions eventually. Tiv drummers set up in a cluster at the center of a dancing circle and the audience forms a third circle around the dancers. Bantu peoples have probably been drumming and dancing this way for thousands of years. Ayinde Bakare, one of the original juju style band masters in Yorubaland called his group the Inner Circle Orchestra, so when I started a dance band in Buffalo circa 1972 I called it The Outer

Circle thinking that the listening outer circle could become a dancing circle any time they wanted to get moving, if *we* were grooving at the center of the party.

One day in the afterschool program, when dealing with one kid's question, I let things get out of control for a few minutes and some of the girls created what came to be called "The Bill Bob Bea." When I turned around after talking with a child about his or her problem they had grouped three conga drums together and were just bouncing up and down, "pogoing" and hitting the conga drums with each bounce shouting Bill! Bob!! Bea!!!, Bill! Bob!! Bea!!!, Bill! Bob!! Bea!!! Lots of energy. So I joined the drumming and asked the girls to take turns starting it off so that everyone could imitate their tempo and dance moves. There was a little flurry of "ownership" issues -- this is our dance and we don't want everyone in it, or people on the outside saying it's "theirs" and we don't want to take part, but that dissolved in the turn taking. We still do "Bill! Bob!! Bea!!!" once in a while, but as I write this I'm remembering that I often forget to do the Tiv thing, and cluster the drums in the center so that bouncing dancers can reach in and drum for their own dancing. The girls reinvent the Tiv wheel (see Ch. 5 of Tiv Song Keil 1979), but I can't remember to be in the tradition?

The circular table is where you can almost always fit in one more for dinner, and also where each person can be "at the head" of the table. A circle of people in a meeting seems to be where "the rotating chair" works best -- the last speaker picks the next person to speak from across the way or sitting right next to them. A drum circle when it gets big enough seems to consist of circles within circles, each little cluster of drummers linked to the next cluster of drummers by one or two people at the periphery of each small cluster or circle. Theatre in the round or half way round in the amphitheater worked well for our ancestors. Will the circle be unbroken? Great question. Great gospel.

Drum Circle? -- Any Circle!

recourse of course

Pat Campbell:

Amazing again what happens when the adult, the teacher, the learned one, meets children where they are, joining in on their play. What a thrill (for the children, but also for the adults who are refreshed in the knowledge that they need not always "call the shots"). A surprising extent of their play is musical, too: tapping rhythms, singing who-knows-what, bouncing, nodding, swaying, swinging, hopping rhythmically. Even while children may claim ownership and perhaps even set up their territorial boundaries of what constitutes their play (and the music they make while playing with blocks, legos, cars, trucks, and dolls), children are complimented by the very idea of having an adult follow their lead, imitating them—rather than always the other way around.