

## SESSION 5: The Theological Reflection Circle

### SESSION 5

**Session:** Introduces the theological reflection method that will be used throughout the curriculum. Begins to play with the possibilities that come with a deliberative, but non-linear tool.

#### OUTLINE OF SCHEDULE:

**15 min:** Gathering Prayer and Homework Processing

**15 min:** Presentation- The Theological Reflection Circle

**15 min:** Role Play Exercise

**05 min:** Large Group Processing

**25 min:** Triad Role Play Exercise

**05 min:** Large Group Processing

**10 min:** Assignment and Closing Words

#### COPIES THAT NEED TO BE MADE:

##### 1 copy per participant:

Gathering Prayer (1 pg)

Model of Theological Reflection (1 pg)

Circles of Meaning-Making (2 pgs or duplex)

Triad Exercise (½ pg)

Homework Assignment (1 pg)

##### 2 copies per participant

Theological Reflection Worksheet (1 pg)

#### By the end of this session:

##### KNOWLEDGE

- Participants will be able to identify the Movements and Actions of the Theological Reflection Circle

##### SKILL

- Participants will identify the Movements and Actions in an observed conversation
- Participants will role play a conversation using the Theological Reflection Circle

## INSTRUCTOR'S CONTENT

### 15 min: Gathering Prayer and Homework Processing

#### ***A few days before the session:***

*Engage a volunteer to provide a case study for demonstration using the Theological Reflection Circle. This may be a participant in your group or a colleague. In this exercise, you're interested in engaging a case study that can have a reasonable conversation in 15 minutes. Your volunteer needs to be clearheaded and articulate enough to tell the story well and be willing to let you keep the process moving so that you are able to demonstrate the entire process. In other words your volunteer needs to understand that this is a teaching exercise and not the opportunity for a professional consult. In order to assure that you can work within the 15 minute timeframe, it would be wise to have some indication of the content a couple of days before you do it.*

***Within the gathering prayer***, there is a designation for individual readers. You may fulfill this by assigning readers to each phrase or by asking the group to simply read any or all of the phrases that are important to them. Allow plenty of time for participants to name any prayers or concerns they want shared with the group. Just as silence is important in conversations, it is also important in prayer. If no participants offer petitions or intercessions, simply allow some quiet space at this point in the prayer.

*The homework you're processing today was actually assigned in Session 3 and was an exercise in description and distillation. Remind participants that you are not interested in the log or description but what they learned in the process of keeping the log and making the description. If your group has a hard time doing this, then use one example of someone's log to demonstrate. This should be a very quick report. And should connect to the work you're going to do with the Theological Reflection Circle.*

### 15 min: Presentation- The Theological Reflection Circle

#### Basic content-

We began our work together by focusing on general listening skills in a helping context. We learned to listen to two stories at one time and keep our story out of the way. We learned to ask different styles of questions and use different skills to keep a story moving. Then we moved on to theological thinking and theological categories. We focused on bringing embedded theology to the surface and working with it in a deliberative way. Next we spent two weeks telling each other our personal theological stories and applying our listening skills as groups.

In this session, we'll introduce the theological reflection circle. This is a nonlinear tool for moving a conversation from obvious layers of description and feeling too deeper layers of meaning and significance. We are going to learn to use your listening skills and theological awareness with this tool so that you can help people uncover the values and sense at the center of their lives. The difficulty in learning this process rests on two things: 1) Its nonlinear nature and 2) the inclination to draw conclusions and meaning too quickly. The beauty of this process rest on two things: 1) Its nonlinear nature and 2) its adaptability across Traditions as well as for non-religious settings. *Distribute Model of Theological Reflection handout.*

One of the most pertinent things that the authors Killen and de Beer offer us is the observation that if you only attend to one category (in any of the circles,) you are effectively doing an academic exercise. It is academic in the sense that you're simply extrapolating from definitions rather than dealing with the tension of seemingly disparate parts. Deep listening of any kind, and Spiritual Mentoring in particular, involves knowledge but it is never academic. This is a process with skills to learn, but you can't simply fill in the slots on a checklist; this is also an art of the heart.

This particular diagram can appear very intimidating at first. So I'm going to talk through very quickly and then we will take it apart section by section. I'm going to describe the actions in each circle and how you

recognize the moment to move the conversation deeper. This description employs a metaphor from Photoshop. The process itself is non-linear in that you can begin anywhere on the surface, with any of the categories, and with any connections. However the categories in each circle of meaning are related and the process of moving from one circle meaning to another has a recognizable pattern. Our work is to learn the pattern and the process. As we move on from this module to other modules where you learn about specific religious Traditions, you will use this same pattern and process. As you become more familiar with the pattern and process you will be less tempted to rush to meaning because you will begin to recognize just how rich even our ordinary lives are! And in that moment you will recognize what a privilege it is to hear each other stories.

Remember as we begin working with the Theological Reflection Circle, I am using an extended metaphor from Photoshop. It all begins with the notion that the person speaking with you is going to show you a picture they have taken of something interesting and important in his or her life. In fact, as frequently happens when somebody has a smart phone, there may be several different shots of the same event. The work of the first or outer circle, the one entitled "Experience or Event," is simply choosing the particular shot on which you will *focus*. The work of the first circle is all about understanding what sets the stage and why the Storyteller is concerned with the situation. When you have a pretty good idea of the various players on the stage, you're ready to move on.

The work of the second circle is to describe the feelings associated with the picture you are examining. In this case think of it as deciding how to crop the picture for someone else. For example, when I take a picture of my dog to send to my mother I want her to understand not just what he's doing but how I feel about it. So if I crop the picture in just the right way I know that she will know whether I am laughing or crying about what he has done. A caveat: In this context feeling is not just about your personal emotions but the overall sense or impression of the situation. When you crop the picture, what tone will it have? When you have a *description* of the energy or overall tone in the situation, you're ready to move on.

The work of the third circle is to consider the snapshot of this experience or event as a metaphor and play with it. If you were doing this in Photoshop you might start applying different filters to the shot you have chosen and cropped. Just as this is not an academic exercise alone, neither is this an artistic endeavor alone. The point of examining the image in this way is to begin to make connections to other parts of the Storyteller's life. Frequently, when you ask people, "How is what happened today like something else in your life?" they will fail to see any connection. If instead, you invite them to extend the metaphor in very deliberate ways, the *insight* will dawn on them that this event reminds them of or connects to another experience. Although you may not discover a full-fledged pattern in one conversation, when connections begin to emerge either with another event or with the emotional content then you are ready to move on.

In the fourth circle, you are taking the photo plus all that it has reminded you of or connected you to and putting them next to a famous photo or work of great art. And you begin to work with your image literally in light of the great one. What does the marvelous art teach you? How does your work measure up? This will be the circle in which you are most deliberately theological. You will take the event or experience from the Storyteller's life and put it in dialogue with his or her Tradition. First, you will be listening for cues and clues as to the Storyteller's Tradition and what it has to offer them in dealing with his or her experience. The range can be from the Storyteller identifying a parable or teaching that applies, to the Storyteller noticing how s/he feels out of step with a community, to the Storyteller describing a comfort or challenge in a spiritual practice and so on. Then, you will be asking questions to help the Storyteller uncover how well this experience matches up to his or her values, ideals, and vision as represented by that Tradition. When the Storyteller begins to imagine what *action* may be possible, you're ready to move on.

The innermost circle is both the simplest and most difficult to negotiate. Here you are asking the Storyteller to decide how to save this picture on which you have worked. Although you may phrase it differently, the circle really contains just one question: What difference does it make that we talked about this? If nothing is

going to change in emotion, insight, or action, then you aren't really through talking! This is not to say that the change may not be small, But even that should be identifiable.

As you move deeper in the conversation, the key is to remember you are literally:

- Exposing theology that is embedded
- By moving a conversation from its natural starting point of external description
- With careful listening and deliberative questions.

*Distribute the handout Circles Of Meaning-Making.*

*Recap for participants that the movements and actions through the circle are always represented as crossing over a boundary and connecting significant parts of our lives:*

*Movement: From Experience to Feeling. Action: Focus.*

*Movement: From Feeling to Image. Action: Describe.*

*Movement: From Image to Insight. Action: Explore.*

*Movement: From Insight to Action. Action: Change.*

### **15 min: Role Play Exercise- Beginning to Use the Theological Reflection Circle**

*Invite your volunteer to come forward and role-play the process you have just outlined. Invite participants to follow the movements on the Circles of Meaning-Making and to make notes or questions for follow-up.*

### **05 min: Large Group Processing**

Ask for some direct feedback to confirm that all participants were able to follow the conversation and understood the transitions:

As I said, at least two categories need to be in play before moving to the next circle of meaning, at what points in this conversation did you recognize that had happened?

What were some of the ways you could tell we were ready to move from one action to the next?

Did you notice any point at which you could have easily been distracted? What skill would help you at that point in the conversation?

### **25 min: Triad Role Play Exercise**

*Distribute the handout (Triad Exercise) and worksheet (1 copy of Theological Reflection Worksheet) and make sure everyone is clear on the task.*

These directions are on the Handout:

You have 25 minutes for this exercise. In groups of three, practice the Theological Reflection process. Use same roles as in an earlier session: Storyteller (Mentee,) Listener (Mentor,) Observer

**Storyteller:** Tell your story of something interesting from the past month and answer questions but do not to rush to move conversation yourself, let the Listener practice the process.

**Listener:** Use Observer as a back-up if uncertain what to ask or where to go

*Remember your instruction from listening exercises to notice what's not in a conversation.*

*When looking at the circle/process of reflection, you have a visual representation of how to do that: If you are unsure what to ask in any part of the process, imagine how what you've heard fits on the circle diagram. Make notes on the circle if necessary.*

**Observer:** Make notes on diagram to represent issues/questions covered in conversation. Call time at 20 minutes and process the exercise in threesome.

**Process questions** that all three of you should answer:

Were moments of transition palpable? Were transitions smooth?

What options presented themselves that weren't used?

What did you wish you had a better grasp of as the conversation progressed?

### **05 min: Large Group Processing**

Ask for some direct feedback to determine what went smoothly and what was rocky.

What transitions were you able to “feel?” Which felt awkward?

What did you wish you knew more about or did better as you were in the midst of the process?

### **10 min: Assignment and Closing Words**

Assignment-

Use the Theological Reflection Worksheet and Homework Assignment sheet to diagram something significant in your life that led to change.

*Make sure participants understand they are using a memory of a real event in this exercise. Also, it is not essential to answer all sample questions in a circle, but they need to have at least two in each circle.*

*Remind participants to bring their materials from this session with them to the next session.*

Closing Words-

#### **LEADER:**

To be a Spiritual Mentor is to step into a wisdom role.

You must both embrace maturity and encourage maturity.

In *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjöld says:

Maturity: among other things,

[is] not to hide one’s strength out of fear and, consequently, live below one’s best.

May you grow your strength and live into your best!

Hammarskjöld also says:

*Maturity*: among other things- [is] a lack of self-consciousness—

the kind you can only attain when you have become entirely indifferent to yourself through an absolute assent to your fate.

[One] who has placed oneself in God’s hand stands free vis-à-vis [others]:

[and] is entirely at ease with them, because he has granted them the right to judge.

As you grow into this ministry, may you be self-aware but not self-conscious.

May you know who you are before God and be unconcerned with how others judge you!

## GATHERING PRAYER

### At this Quiet Time by Rev. Edward T. Atkinson

**LEADER:**

At this quiet time and in this place of worship  
we would seek to know more deeply what it means to love one another.

**ALL:**

We know so well our own needs.  
We know that we, ourselves need understanding, affection and recognition.

**LEADER:**

Why is it then that so often we hesitate to extend these precious gifts to others?

**INDIVIDUAL READERS:**

- The cost of a kind word is small.
- The moment that it takes to listen could hardly be better used.
- A gesture of forgiveness can mark a new beginning.
- An embrace or a note of appreciation can convey crucial encouragement and comfort.

**LEADER:**

And yet, so often we fail even within our own families  
to live by the sacred command that we should love one another.  
*Let us take time today to remember the needs, worries, hopes and dreams of those we carry in our hearts.  
Please feel free to name them now.*  
*(Pause for participants to name any concerns, celebrations, or intercessions.)*  
*Let us bless all that has been said and all that is unspoken.*

**ALL:**

We pray for the courage to take the risks of love.  
We pray for the insight to see ourselves and others in perspective.  
We pray for humility and understanding  
that we may always stand ready to forgive and begin anew.

**LEADER:**

Spirit of Life and of Love within and among us, strengthen our faith together,  
increase our resolve to give more generously of ourselves.

**ALL:**

In peace we pray: Amen.

## MODEL OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Inspired by *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Patricia O'Connell Killen & John de Beer (New York: Crossroad, 1994)

- 1) KILLEN & de BEER developed their model after observing groups in action
- 2) Their biggest caution is: don't move to meaning too quickly

### MOVEMENTS

**Circle 1: EXPERIENCE/EVENT**

**Action, Culture, Position, Tradition**

Figure out which snapshot on the digital camera best captures YOUR perspective.

**From Experience to Feeling: Focus**

**Circle 2: HEART OF THE MATTER DESCRIBED BY**

**Emotional Energy, Tension, Clarification, Focus on Issues**

Crop the picture and define what kind of borders it will have.

**From Feeling to Image: Describe**

**Circle 3: PLAYING WITH THE METAPHOR BY**

**Comparing, Contrasting, Developing and Extending It**

Drop the snapshot into Photo Shop: What else do you see now?

**From Image to Insight: Explore**

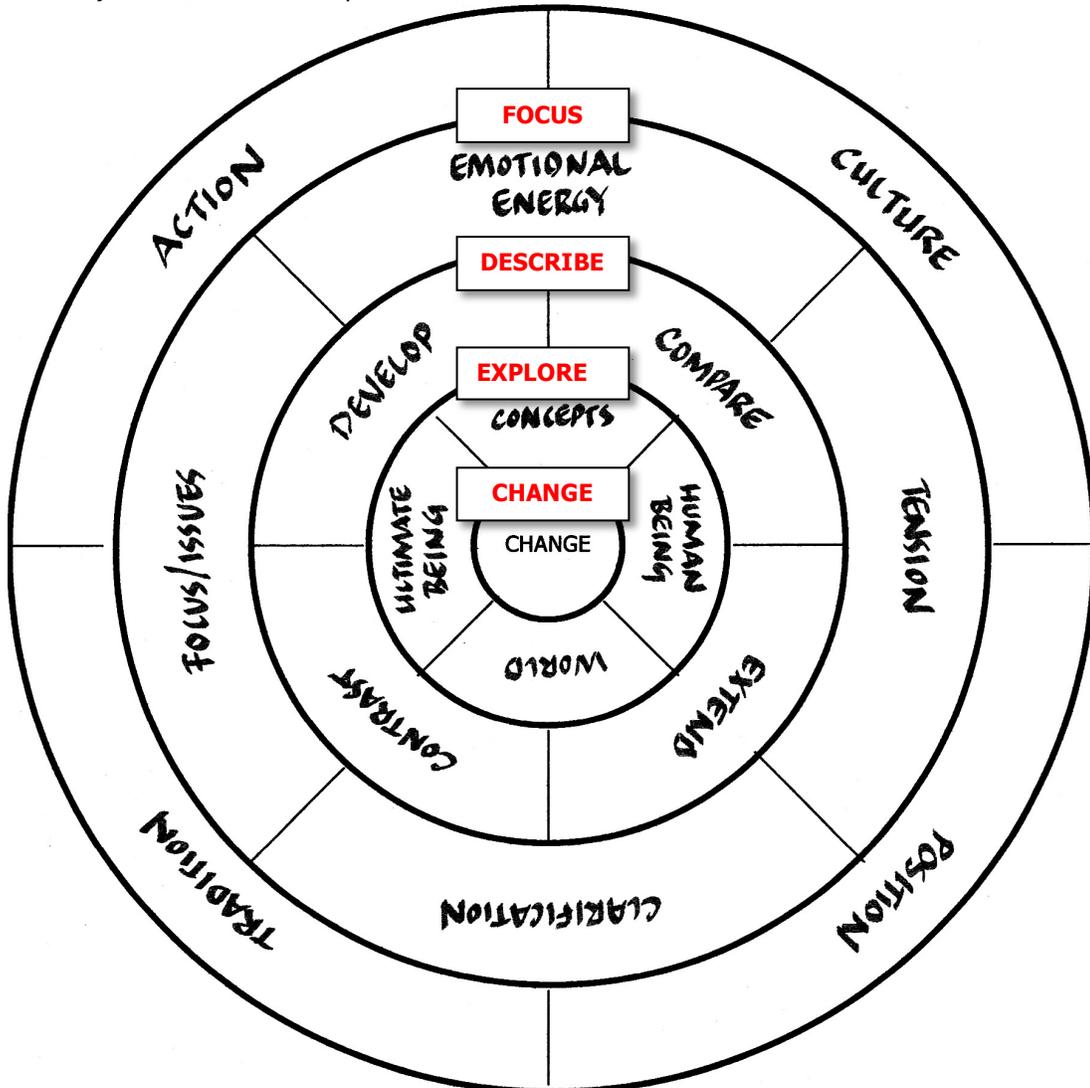
**Circle 4: PLACING OUR INSIGHT IN DIALOGUE WITH OUR TRADITION'S UNDERSTANDING OF HUMANITY, ULTIMACY, WORLD VIEW AND ITS USE OF MENTAL MODELS**

View the snapshot next to some masterpieces (like Ansel Adams.)

**From Insight to Action: Change**

**Circle 5: CHANGE**

Decide how you will save this snapshot.



## CIRCLES OF MEANING-MAKING & MOVEMENTS

*Don't move to meaning too quickly!*

**EXPERIENCE/EVENT:** What happens to us, accounting of inner and outer dimensions

Action: Something done, lived narrative

Culture: Group identity, social patterns of interaction, physical environment

Position: Attitudes, opinions, beliefs, convictions

Tradition: Sources of authority

### ***Help your mentees:***

Describe using 5 senses and Who/What/Where/When/How. DO NOT ask why at this point.

Narrate flow

Notice what is dynamic, what is constant, what is largely unnoticed

Suspend judgments

Should/ought/never/always/if only are judgments and interpretations: THESE ARE CLUTTER!

**From Experience to Feeling: Focus**

**FEELING:** Actual physical sensations, affective undercarriage, uncovering potency of experience

Emotional energy: Power and vulnerability

Tension: Where things are being pulled apart or stretched

Clarification: Embedded questions

Focus/Issues: Values, wisdom, connections to the transcendent

### ***Help your mentees:***

Describe the physical sensations and affect without judgment

Create a space that is different from cultural expressions:

E.g. Over-emoting on Jerry Springer never gets to real feelings

E.g. Excusing on Judge Judy never gets to system or order through reasoning

Talking about feelings expands our capacity as humans. Welcome and articulate feelings!

Determine what is the undergirding value or volatility

Listen for the point of greatest intensity: ASK QUESTIONS OF THIS

Be confident that feelings do not have a valence. Behaviors and feelings are valued differently.

Feelings have positive and negative connotations for us but they are not good or bad, they just are

Pursue clarity of what is most pressing.

Recognize most situations are beyond a one-conversation solution; this can be revisited

**From Feeling to Image: Describe**

**IMAGE:** Idioms, metaphors, references (literary, cultural, religious)

Compare: Congruence with idiom/metaphor/reference

Extend: Logical conclusions and fanciful possibilities

Contrast: Disparity with idiom/metaphor/reference

Develop: Flesh out the picture

### ***Help your mentees:***

Recognize this is a felt response that draws together the experience, feelings, and subconscious connections: an image is a gestalt or totality

This pulls together and breaks open an event: encourage openness and intensifying image

Avoid controlling or suppressing the image, do not predict full meaning, analyze, or problem-solve

This is an easy point for folks to jump out of the process because

- It feels like insight is achieved
- It feels like going further might make the vulnerability painful
- With a strong preference for either-or this point seems to give folks a choice (accept/reject image)

Understand *everyone* has a symbolic matrix: Symbols are actions with many layers of meaning.

Consulting dreams.com is not sufficient for exploring what *your* images mean!

**From Image to Insight: Explore**

**INSIGHT:** Shift in power, vision, possibility, energy

Concepts: Spiritual essentials, practices, tweakings

Human being: Categories of human capacity and ability

World: Mental models, history, community

Ultimate being: Categories of immanence/transcendence and enduring meaning

**Help your mentees:**

Describe the change accurately

“Aha!” is insufficient

E.g. The picture went from color to black & white. The voice was flat and no longer frantic.

Realize that not all insights are created equal

Depth, value and need are all different

Connect to their own patterns and themes

Symbolic matrices are all about patterns and themes

Understand that insight is really not accidental

Insight is part of revelation

Insight is a product of openness and discipline

**From Insight to Action: Change**

**CHANGE/ACTION:** Addresses: What difference does this conversation make?

**Help your mentees:**

Decide if this insight is motivation for action

If so, what inertia must be overcome?

If so, what is needed?

- Prayer: continued reflection and dialogue
- Plan: tools, strategies, skills, resources
- People: accountability?

If not, what is the proper way of integrating this insight?

Articulate what is left untended and what might need to be revisited

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**CORE KNOWLEDGE**

**As you move deeper in the Theological Reflection conversation, you are:**

Exposing theology that is embedded

By moving a conversation from its natural starting point of external description

With careful listening and deliberative questions.

**The movements and actions of Theological Reflection using this circle model are:**

Movement 1: From Experience to Feeling

Movement 2: From Feeling to Image

Movement 3: From Image to Insight

Movement 4: From Insight to Action

Action: Focus

Action: Describe

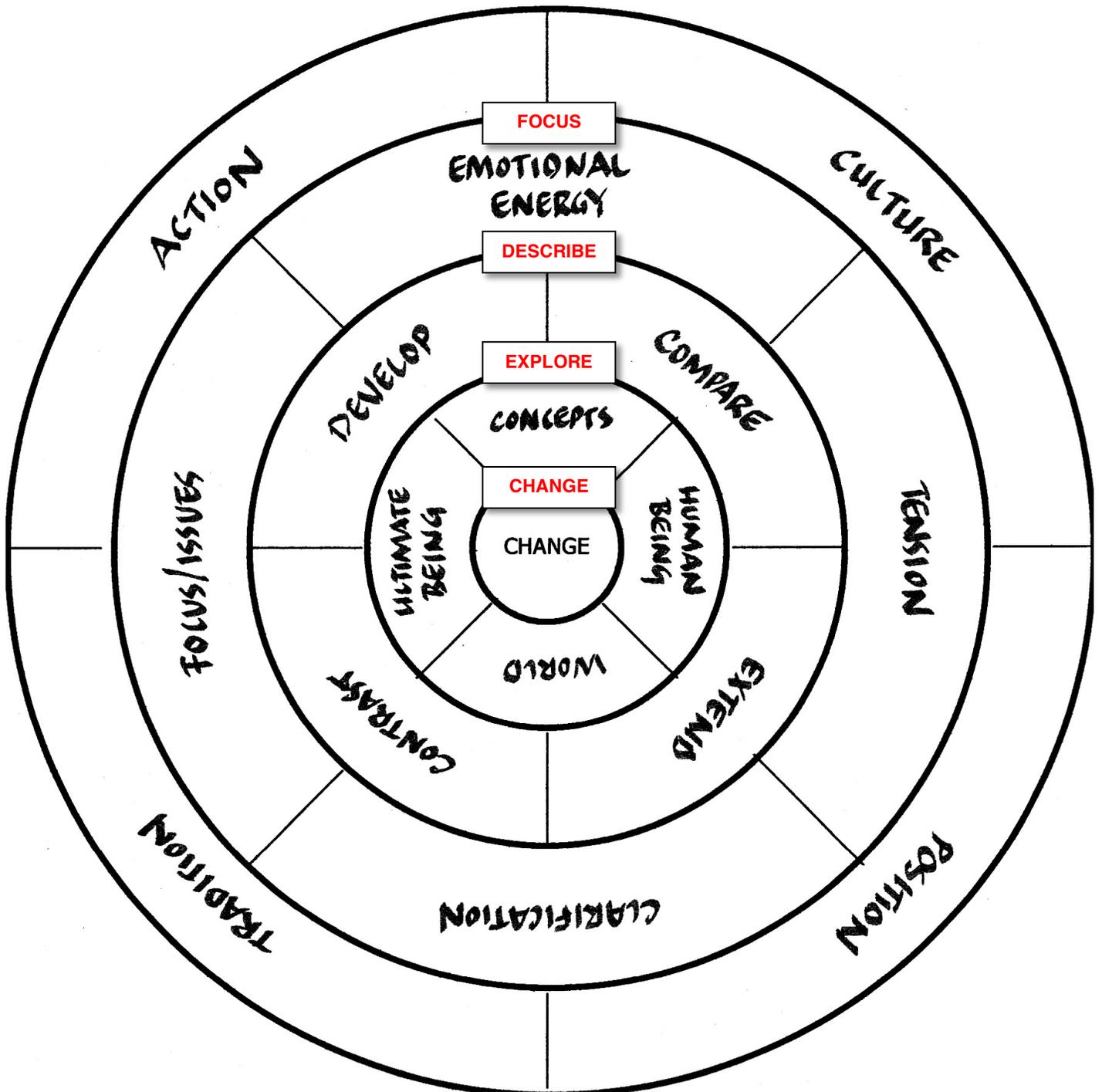
Action: Explore

Action: Change

These are represented as crossing over a boundary and connecting significant parts of our lives.

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THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION WORKSHEET



## TRIAD EXERCISE

You have 25 minutes for this exercise.

In groups of three, practice the Theological Reflection process. Use same roles as in an earlier session:

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**Storyteller:** Tell your story of something interesting from the past month and answer questions but do not to rush to move conversation yourself, let the Listener practice the process.

**Listener:** Use Observer as a back-up if you are uncertain what to ask or where to go.

*Remember your instruction from listening exercises to notice what's not in a conversation.*

*When looking at the circle/process of reflection, you have a visual representation of how to do that:*

*If you are unsure what to ask in any part of the process,*

*imagine how what you've heard fits on the circle diagram.*

*Make notes on the diagram if necessary.*

**Observer:** Make notes on the diagram to represent issues/questions covered in conversation.

Call time at 20 minutes and process the exercise in threesome.

**Process questions** that all three of you should answer:

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What did you wish you had a better grasp of as the conversation progressed?

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## HOMWORK SESSION 5

Use the Theological Reflection Worksheet to diagram something significant in your life that led to change.

- Reflect on a time of change in your life. It may be something recent or in your past.
- Make notes on the worksheet to describe the layers of the experience  
*These are examples of questions for the categories of each circle*

Circle 1: Where did you start?

Action: What were you doing?

Culture: What groups did you identify with?

Position: What attitudes and beliefs characterized you?

Tradition: Who or what were your sources of authority?

Circle 2: What was the energy of the moment as things began to shift?

Emotional energy: Where did you notice power or lack of power?

Tension: What felt like it was being pulled apart or stretched?

Clarification: What did you know or notice that might have been hidden from others?

Focus/Issues: What values were at stake? Who or what helped you focus?

Circle 3: What image or metaphor represented the situation for you? How did that relate to a previous (or since) situation for you?

Compare: What was going on that was similar to this metaphor you named?

Extend: If this metaphor was accurate what would be some logical conclusions and fanciful possibilities in the way it could play out?

Contrast: What was going on that was different from this metaphor?

Develop: Flesh out the picture

Circle 4: What connections were you making? How did your insight match or refine your values?

Concepts: What spiritual practices and teachings were essential for you? How did that figure in the picture? How did you tweak them?

Human being: What did you think of human capacity and ability at the time? How did that influence what you expected of yourself?

World: What mental models organized your thinking? How did history and community make a difference in the situation?

Ultimate being: What did you understand about divinity, immanence and transcendence, and enduring meaning that effected you? What was your relationship to divinity?

Circle 5: What brought you to the moment of change?

Why do you think of that situation or time as significant?