

Story Circle Toolkit

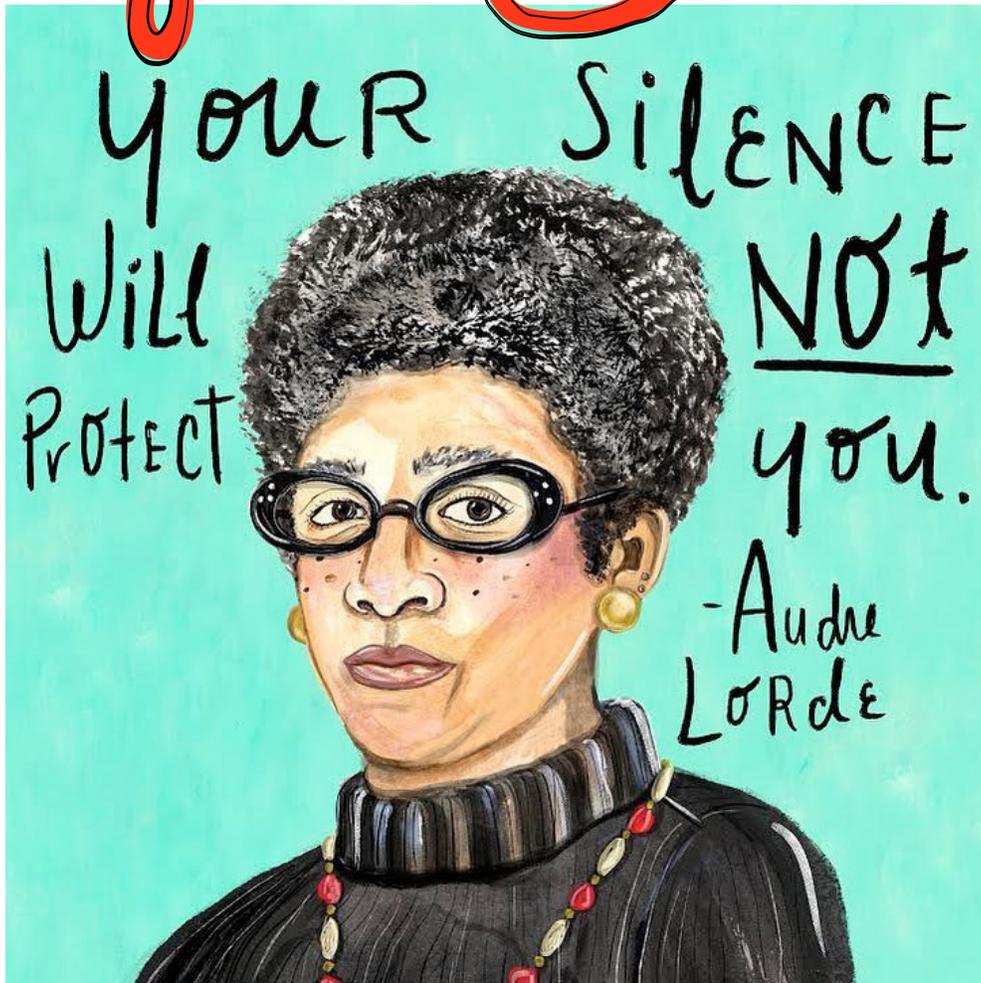


Illustration: Jen Keenan

John O'Neal, civil rights activist, playwright, actor and co-founder of Free Southern Theater, formed Story Circles as an alternative to the traditional theater talkback. He made the methodology available to the Ashé Cultural Arts Center and Junebug Productions, who shared the process with the National Public Housing Museum.

"Art contributes to the way people live, confront, + solve problems."

— John O'Neal

A Story Circle is a group facilitation process built around narrative and personal experience. A group of people tell personal stories, led by a facilitator. Story Circles are always meant to create a safe space for people to share across different experiences. In an in-person Story Circle, a group of people sit or stand in a circle. In virtual spaces such as Zoom, each person should be mindful of their background environment, mute when not talking, and keep cameras on, if and when possible.

WHAT IS AND IS NOT A STORY?

- A story is a narrative of events drawn from the teller's personal experience.
- A story can be from a memory, a dream, a reflection, a moment in time, and more.
- A story typically has a beginning, middle, and end.
- A story is not a lecture, an argument, nor a debate.

"The rules of the story circle are the rules of civil participation in society. You agree to listen. You agree to respect."

— John O'Neal

STORY CIRCLES SHOULD:

- Include 5 to 20 people sitting in a circle or virtual space, with cameras on.
- No pens, notepads, pocketbooks, etc.
- Have one facilitator who begins, oversees, and ends the Circle.
- Have a stated time that each story lasts and a timekeeper.
- Allow for silences between and within stories.
- Be as much about listening as about telling. No cross talk.
- Allow each story to build off of or influence the next story.

STORY CIRCLE PROMPT

- Assign a timekeeper (3 minutes).
- Go clockwise or popcorn-style (in random order) from the first storyteller.
- Make sure you tell a story.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

John O'Neal and the Story Circle method:

[Genzlinger, Neil, "John O'Neal, 78, Champion of Theater in the Deep South, Dies.," February, 2019](#)

[Moore, "Quess?"Michael, "Talkin Revolution, Free Southern Theater Then and Now.," October 2013](#)



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