

The Circle of Heaven

A Game About Justice, Harm, and Healing by Mark L. S. Stone

Abstract

Restorative justice circles are becoming popular in schools, prisons, and communities all over the world. Instead of finding someone to blame and punish, the goal of an RJ Circle, as they are colloquially called, is to clear up bad feelings and reestablish trust. Consequences, if necessary, are focused on what is necessary to restore community trust.

The Circle of Heaven teaches some of the skills behind RJ Circles through a game in which the players portray fictional gods who have - as gods of every mythology are wont to do - harmed and betrayed each other over the years. Players will have the opportunity to create their own mythic selves, select the crimes they have been a part of as perpetrator, witness, and victim, and then seek justice. One player will portray a facilitator - a sort of a GM - but they are *also* a god and *also* a part of the community. Nobody is impartial and detached when someone in the community has suffered harm.

Unfortunately, this game doesn't teach you everything you need to know to run a restorative justice circle. I like to think of it as an introduction to the concepts involved and an invitation to learn more.

Vitals

- **Players:** 1 facilitator, 5 to 10 participants
- **Run Time:** ~4 hours
- **Equipment:** 1 suitably evocative object to serve as a talking piece¹, 1 copy of this document, 1 character sheet per player, arts & crafts supplies (mask "blanks," cloth masks, cardstock cut-out masks, or even paper plates are encouraged), scissors and a trash receptacle. Additionally, large pad of paper or a whiteboard to write down blacklisted themes for everyone to see would come in handy.

Tone

The tone of Circle of Heaven is going to vary depending on what the players bring to the table. One game might be very serious, drawing on dark myths of murder, maiming, and violation, while another could draw on light-hearted trickster tales of pranks and illusions. A third game could include some of both. Circle of Heaven can be a very talky game. However, flashbacks add moments of action.

Safety

This can be a dark game. These safety mechanics will help make sure everyone has a good time. As always, player > game.

- **Check in.** Make the "ok" symbol to someone who seems to be having an intense experience. If they respond with a "thumbs up" sign, continue. The other two options - the unsure "wave hand" gesture or a "thumbs down" sign - indicates that you should pause the game and see what's up.
- **Cut/Break.** At any time, a player can say "cut." This indicates that the game has to pause so the facilitator can lead a conversation about how to ensure that all players are comfortable. Calling "break" indicates that game can continue, but the scene should not become any more intense than it already is..
- **Open Door.** In a real RJ Circle, one of the expectations is "stay in the circle." This isn't a real RJ circle, though - it's just a game. Anyone can leave at any time and return if they change their mind.
- **Shield.** In this game, players will sometimes be called upon to act as secondary characters in other players' flashbacks. If a player is cast in a role that they are not comfortable with, they should cross their forearms over the chest. This "shield" gesture indicates that the player who is framing the flashback needs to pick a different actor for that role.
- **Veto.** Players will have the opportunity to blacklist themes they are not comfortable with.

¹ Do not, under any circumstances, refer to this as a "talking stick." A talking stick is a specific practice from indigenous North American cultures. A "talking piece" is simply descriptive of what the object does - designate who's allowed to talk.

Outline

Step One: Pregame

Facilitator (read out loud): *You are a pantheon of gods who are trying to resolve a series of conflicts that have brought chaos to their community. Soon, we will create our characters and decide how they have hurt each other, but first we need to make sure that all the players will be safe and comfortable. Please take a minute to consider what kinds of crimes you are uncomfortable playing with.*

Give the group a minute to consider. Then, instruct the players to close their eyes. Tell them that you will read out a list of crimes and that they should raise their hand if they hear a crime they would like to blacklist from the game. The list of crimes I recommend reading is: adultery, assault, blackmail, child abuse, defamation, incest, kidnapping or imprisonment, invasion of privacy, manslaughter, murder, negligence, sexual assault, theft, torture, vandalism, and offenses targeted at a person based on them being (note each separately) female, non-straight, gender nonconforming, or a member of a cultural minority. After the players open their eyes, give them a chance to add any crimes to the list.

Pass out character sheets and tell the players how to fill them out. Make sure they understand that they must be a perpetrator, witness, and a victim. Perpetrator doesn't mean "wrong-doer," it just means someone who has inflicted harm, justified or not.

Give the group 10 minutes to fill out their character sheets. Make the material in the "God Index" below available to players.

Next, players will take 20 minutes to create their masks. Make sure that they understand the three purposes of the mask: creating a mythic tone, expressing their character's nature, and providing a barrier between the player and the world that will hopefully make it easier to portray characters who have caused harm to others.

After the masks have been made (and while media like glue or ink dry), direct the players to form two circles, one on the outside facing in and one on the inside facing out. The facilitator might have the players count off. Tell the players to work with whoever they are across from to create links between the crimes listed on their character sheets. Is it possible for one character to be another character's perpetrator, victim, or witness? Encourage players to add details and modify what's on their sheets as needed. After several minutes, instruct the outer circle to take one step to the left, bringing each player into contact with a new partner. As each crime is fleshed out with at least one player victim, perpetrator, and witness, those players should sit down. The facilitator should reform the circles as needed to keep the process moving. Note that a player can be involved in multiple crimes with multiple roles - there is no rule saying that a player can only be the perpetrator, witness, or victim of only one crime, that a crime can't have multiple perpetrators, victims, or witnesses, etc.

The facilitator may need to step in to insure that all players are able to form the necessary connections.

Step Two: The Game

At this point, the facilitator explains the rules of the game as described below, including how to use the talking piece, how scenes will be framed, and how the game will end. If sexual crimes have not been blacklisted, make sure that players understand the limitations around portrayals of abuse.

Also, make sure that players understand the in-game consequences of violating the expectations of the circle: if any character objects to another character failing to meet the expectations (speaking out of turn, being disrespectful, etc.), they will point their fist at them. When three characters are pointing their fists at an offending god, that god will be magically silenced until the facilitator releases them.

Facilitator (read aloud): *These are the expectations of a justice circle: stay in the circle, both physically and mentally, honor confidentiality, speak and listen from the heart, speak and listen with respect, and obey the talking piece. We all know about the conflicts that have wracked our pantheon, and they have gotten to the point that our mortal worshippers are suffering. You have chosen me to facilitate this gathering. I will be asking questions and you will answer them, in turn, when you hold the talking piece.*

These are the questions you will ask, in order:

1. How has the state of the community impacted you?
2. How were you acted upon?
3. What actions did you take?
4. What were you thinking when these things happened?
5. What about this has been the hardest for you?
6. What do you need in order to restore this community?

As described above, players will pass the talking piece around the circle and answer the questions. Every three shares, interrupt the circle to ask a player to frame a flashback around one of the crimes on their character sheet. The facilitator should choose a player to frame a scene based on their sense of drama.

When a player is selected to frame a scene, they should do the following:

1. Identify the perpetrator, the victim, and the crime: ie. this is the story of how [PERPETRATOR] did [CRIME] to [VICTIM].
2. Create a situation. Some possible examples include the crime itself (with all participants present), [PERPETRATOR] brags to [WITNESS] about their crime, [VICTIM] goes to another character (possibly a [WITNESS]) for sympathy, or [WITNESS] discusses what they saw with another character (possibly a [WITNESS]).²
3. Name any secondary characters needed and cast those characters, using their fellow players as actors.
4. Give any other instructions necessary to depict the scene.

When a player frames a scene, she should tear off the corner of their character sheet marked with a star. Whenever a player is called upon to play a secondary character who is not their character, they should tear off a different corner of their character sheet. Once a character sheet has no corners, can only be called upon to play his their own character.

After six times around the circle (ie. after every character has had a chance to answer all six questions) or when the time allotted to gameplay has ended, the facilitator moves on to the final stage.

Step Three: Ending the Game/Postgame

Facilitator (read aloud): *The circle is now ended. We have all spoken of the crimes we have witnessed, perpetrated, and been subject to. In time, perhaps, some of these crimes will be answered with punishments. We may as a community chose to censure, exile, or even destroy some of our number. Now is not that time. The game is now over.*

Facilitator (read aloud): It's now time to derole. We will take turns in a circle. When it's your turn, step forwards, take off your mask, and answer these three questions:

- What was your character's name?
- How will your character make amends? Or will the community decide to exile or even destroy them?
- What is your name?
- Where are you the player going next? What's your fate?

When the game is over, some players may want to destroy their masks using the provided scissors.

Designer's Notes

If we are going to say that we see and value everyone's humanity, we have to mean everyone. This includes all the victims and all the perpetrators. It includes, people who are just protecting themselves and people who are hurt and and angry and confused. It includes People who do terrible things because they subscribe to ideologies we find hideous and people who do terrible things for reasons we don't understand.

None of this means that perpetrators shouldn't be held accountable for their actions. None of this means that victims and potential victims don't deserve to be kept safe. When accountability comes from an accord between the perpetrator and the victim, real justice becomes possible. When it doesn't, the best you can do is harm reduction.

Restorative justice benefits victims, too. Seeing the person who hurt you acknowledge the harm they caused and be a part of the process of making amends and restoring trust is much more powerful than simply watching them be hurt, in turn, by someone else.

I have been a secondary school teacher for ten years. In my decade in education, restorative justice is the only method that I have seen really work to identify the harm and reintegrate perpetrators with the community, rebuilding trust and making healing possible. I have led restorative justice circles to resolve bullying, bigoted and ignorant behavior, and ordinary interpersonal conflict. Restorative justice is already used in schools, prisons, and communities across the world.


My hope is that *The Circle of Heaven* introduces the principles of restorative justice. To learn more, check out restorativejustice.org, one of many resources for learning more about this method of conflict resolution and community building.

² THIS NOTE IS IMPORTANT. Most groups will choose to blacklist sexual assault. Even if your group doesn't, flashbacks depicting an actual assault are too much for a game to contain. Other options described above provide a way to explicate this narrative element.

God Index

Some things gods can be responsible for...		Some jobs that gods might do for each other...
Animals (in general or a specific animal) Carrying messages (to mortals or between gods) Childbirth Death Fire Farming Fighting a specific cosmic enemy People doing good/bad thing	Plants (in general, or a specific plant) Ruling (either as the chief god or the patron of mortals who rule) Seasons (one or all) Technology Theft War Weather (or a specific kind of weather)	Beginning a new world (after someone else ends it) Bringing bad luck Cursing people Eating the souls of bad people Ending the world (when the time comes) Guarding passages between dimensions Guarding the source of immortality Granting wishes Holding up the sky Judging mortals or other gods Wrangling angels or other divine servants
Some bad things that gods do to each other or to each others' favorite mortals		Some good things that gods do for each other or for favorite mortals
Seduce a spouse or lover Steal something important Kidnap their child Play an embarrassing trick on them. Make their job harder or take their job away Transform them into something gross Force them to do a dangerous/difficult/boring job for a long time Force them to endure a painful/boring punishment for a long time Spread a story (true or false) that is embarrassing Destroy a favorite city or country		Tell a valuable secret. Teach them some cool magic. Give them a powerful artifact Help them defeat a common enemy. Bless a mortal with long life. Make a mortal into an immortal. Carry a child for them Start or end the world Free them from imprisonment. Give them an important or easy job.

Character Sheet

What is your name?	
What are your titles?	
Who are your worshippers?	
Why did you come to this circle?	
What crimes have you been involved with as a... 	Witness
	Perpetrator
	Victim