



MARK ZARRILLO

Drummer Drum Circle Facilitator

by Nancy Cohen

Rhythm is fundamental. The first rhythmic vibrations we hear and feel are from a mother's heartbeat, the pulse of life. In music, drums create and sustain rhythm and connect us with our primal nature. Drumming has been utilized since ancient times in diverse cultures. In addition to unifying communities, it has helped people: communicate; experience renewal; create traditions and ceremonies; prepare for battle; honor rites of passage; and, celebrate life. According to local drum circle facilitator, Mark Zarrillo, "Drumming can be a metaphor for any challenge or opportunity in life. It has the power to energize, relax, motivate, educate, heal, unite and inspire. Community drumming is an extraordinary dialogue that connects us with our world, our neighbors and ourselves."

Drumming circles are great equalizers. They are accessible to people of all ages and abilities, even those believing they're rhythmically-challenged. No experience is necessary. People come to drums from different places, backgrounds, and perspectives, for numerous reasons. Though each experience is unique, drumming brings together people who might not otherwise have a chance to interact. As Mark describes it, "in drum circles we talk without words." People's challenges, career, spirituality, finances, politics, or anything that might otherwise separate, don't matter. Drum circles are created "in the moment" by everyone involved. Each participant is valued for their unique contribution to the group song.

Mark says drum circles are experiential, so the sooner we get from our head into our heart, the better.

Participants can simply listen, or play one of myriad world percussion instruments. Circle is not a class with a teacher commanding, grading, or judging. Each has its own rhythm and is an evolving, dynamic process with collaboration as its foundation. Mark often refers to "the space between the notes," emphasizing that listening to each other is as important as playing. This creates space for your mind, the music, and your soul to dance.

Mark's circles involve musicians and non-musicians, many seeking: physical workout or release; a spiritual experience; self empowerment; fun; social connection; an introduction to rhythm/percussion; and/or, stress reduction. Drumming can be a: "magic carpet" for journeying; retreat or escape; place to find your power and learn to express yourself. Mark suggests "drumming is meditation in action, or meditation for people who are fidgety." He often advocates drumming for long periods of time. Repetition of rhythm, like a mantra, helps participants get past expectations of entertainment, boredom, frustration, anxiety, or stress, which can be distracting. "Letting yourself get into rhythm – that's when the magic happens. When we own our feelings and take responsibility for our part in music's creation, it is always beautiful." Like life, sometimes "wow!" happens, as does frustration, sadness, delight, disappointment, or joy.

A facilitator provides the framework. Mark uses few words, leaving dialogue to the music. Though occasionally offering some background and instrument introduction, he asserts it's not about copying him or mastering a technique. No technique is needed. Rather, it's about the freedom



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and allowance of self to express its inner voice. He creates the space for that unfolding and each person chooses how they participate, on which instruments, and what they want to convey. His circles, no two completely alike, have also included participants' playing didgeridoo, saxophone, Native American flute, and electric guitar, dancing, singing, and reciting poetry.

As well as being pleasurable, a number of studies suggest drumming is beneficial psychologically, physiologically, and spiritually. Research conducted on drum circles (researchers include Barry Bittman, Christine Stevens, many others) shows that, while not a panacea, they are an invaluable tool for healing from, and handling, stress, fatigue, hypertension, chronic pain, mental/emotional disorders, cancer, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, addictions, and other issues. Drumming may: positively affect brain waves and motor function; promote relaxation; boost immunity; facilitate communication; stimulate creativity; and, enhance self-empowerment and belonging. It has been used in corporations (team-building, diversity training and de-stressing), schools (leadership development, academic and cultural enrichment), programs for at-risk youth, and prisons. Drumming is like giving our entire being a massage. Sound vibrations resonate through the body and create balance. Each person can drum their feelings without speaking a word.

Mark's drumming journey includes creating rhythms as a child using wooden spoons on pots and pans, then hand-drumming on books spread across his bed. He was in school band, received his first drums around 13, and has

since played everything from 30's jazz standards to rock to hard-core punk. Reading Mickey Hart's *Drumming at the Edge of Magic* fortified his interest in drum circles and his feeling that it is a responsibility and privilege to bring our gifts to life, particularly when in service to others. Despite a life of drumming and comfort with playing, however, Mark says once he thought about creating a circle, it took nine months to "drum up" the courage and put himself "out there" as a facilitator. Ultimately feeling, like anyone with a calling, it was too important not to do it, he worked through his fears and has been leading drum circles for over five years.

Upon reflection, Mark says facilitating has made him a better drummer because it taught him how to uncover hidden songs in rhythm. He is less rigid, hears music differently, and appreciates each song's evolution. Rather than getting over-involved in beats and counting, he finds value in his expanded listening, which enables presence in the moment, and to himself and others.

Mark continues investigating different avenues for creating community. He currently leads two circles, open to everyone, one meeting the first Friday of each month at the Unitarian Society of New Haven in Hamden, and another on the third Friday each month at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden.

For anyone curious about drumming, Mark recommends attending a drum circle. He suggests approaching drumming as an experiential process of exploration and discovery, and cautions against pigeonholing ourselves by only playing one instrument. Instead, he advocates trying a variety of percussion equipment to find which resonate most.

I have participated in Mark's circles and, from those experiences, affectionately nicknamed him "The Germinator." Germination involves the origin of some development. His easy facilitation style and the ensuing drumming can evoke myriad responses, often inspiring new perspectives. He has "left a Mark" on others, as well, with circle participant Kendra Hough stating: "Mark believes and explains that what we do is about the journey (of life), not about talent, competition or volume. His approach epitomizes acceptance, encouragement and the joy in the shared experience of group participation. He encourages the freedom of expression through drumming. Without floating off into the esoteric, Mark shares his spiritual nature and conviction that drumming is not only beneficial, but provides an opportunity for maintaining or perhaps even regaining health through the vibrational qualities of sound... Mark is sowing and cultivating an organic garden of community drummers -- and what a delicious harvest. Talk about healthy life-style choices -- this is my number one pick!"

Mark holds an M.A. in Humanities from SUNY Buffalo, attended a music and culture intensive in Guinea, and is a trained HealthRHYTHMS® facilitator. He draws upon his rich understanding of West African music/culture, and over 35 years of drumming wisdom. Contact Mark at mark@drummingspirit.com, www.drummingspirit.com (new site developing!).