

## The Unspoken Cycle Within the Circle

**February 26, 2024**

During every long rehearsal, we would sit in a circle. We read plays in this circle, we laughed in this circle, we learned how to improvise in this circle, we were vulnerable and cried in this circle, and we grew up in this circle. Up until my junior year of high school, I absolutely adored the circle. Early on in our Friends Academy Theater careers, our directors established a common consensus that what we said and heard in the circle never left. Furthermore, the common consensus extended to any private conversation between the adult directors and us. If parents were to know what was discussed in the circle, the staff would likely be reported— they knew this. As a result, our director threatened to blacklist us from any decent role if the department was confronted by parents or administration. I would soon learn that everything you say in that circle will secretly be used against you behind closed doors.

People use circles to demonstrate cycles; you could use this circle to do the same as my peers and I were unknowingly becoming a part of a cycle of grooming that goes back decades.

**January 11th, 2020**

Today our circle conversation focused on the importance of free will, and I am the reason. Walking into our eight hour, intense weekly Saturday rehearsal, my best friends and I eagerly told one of our other friends how we were going to teach him a trivial Tik Tok dance during our lunch break. When he responded with “No way, that is cringey!” I replied back with “C’mon it will be fun!” followed by my best friend jokingly responding with “We are doing it, so get excited!” Instead of acknowledging the clear sarcasm in both of our voices, our director, Tracey, decided to individually address me in front of our 30 person cast: “*Emma you have absolutely no*

*power or authority here, so stop forcing him to do something against his will.*” She then ordered us to sit in a circle where she explained how we as cast mates— by “we” she means I— are not allowed to force each other into doing things during our very minimal time off. I sit there like I always do everytime this happens: look down to avoid the death glare, hold back tears as they water in my eyes, and pray that the red-flushed cheeks will eventually go away. At this point in the musical, almost every other castmate knows I am Tracey’s current target. They watch the mistreatment from afar, grateful it is not them. On this unlucky day they know they are witnesses to a classic humiliation tactic that works like a charm. They give sympathetic glances later as we start our warm up, noticing the bloodshot eyes that I hide by looking down in between push ups.

The rest of the rehearsal continues as normal. We get thrown into the rhythm of singing and dancing for hours straight. Tracey whips out the megaphone and barks orders, our choreographer, Kimo, tries to choreograph us, and our costume department, Pia and Erica, run around the stage all morning tapping our shoulders mid routine to grab our measurements. Today we get a 20 minute lunch break— they are feeling generous.

For lunch, I reunite with my four best friends: Lucy, Sarah, Erica, and Angelina. I never see Sarah and Angelina during rehearsal anymore because they are dance captains and stay at the front. We sit outside today as all of us are too bothered by this morning’s circle conversation to socialize. I ask out loud for what feels like the millionth time “Do you think anything is wrong with me?” and “Why am I the target?”

I stray off from the group during the last 10 minutes— the halfway point if you will— to go to Kimo’s office. Kimo is not only the theater department's choreographer, but he is my dance teacher of five years, my mentor for our theater department’s Honors Arts program, and although I hate to admit it, my father figure. Kimo has stated multiple times since becoming my mentor

how I am a miniature version of himself. He always reminds me that Tracey helped him manage his anxiety in the way that he now helps me. Just like he told Tracey everything, I tell him everything, including what Tracey tells me. He assures me that Tracey never means what she says, yet he always apologizes for her behavior.

Due to how often I am at school, I know his office better than I know my own room. The green and yellow paneled walls, the smell of eucalyptus from the diffuser that is on all day, the leather brown couch, every feature feels comforting. *I wish I knew better.*

We recap the circle. He tells me that moment was just a reminder to have the conversation rather than being the direct cause. We both know the statement lacks honesty. He gives me a hug, and I walk back into the auditorium to practice the new choreography for “King of New York” before the second half of rehearsal.

Rehearsal ends the same way every time with individual feedback. Since October of this year, I now fear feedback. Tracey lists the leads and I to stay behind. Sick to my stomach from the unavoidable pit that now permanently resides there, light-headed from the half of my bagel with butter that I barely could stomach at lunch, I stand at the back of the line, watching each of the leads receive their feedback on their performances one-by-one. I never receive performance feedback anymore; instead she finds moments of mental weaknesses in rehearsal to critique my personality. Most of what she says makes absolutely no sense: *“Emma, why can you not seem to get our feedback through that head of yours?” “Emma, until you get therapy you are not getting a role with more than eight lines in one of our shows!” “Emma, stop talking to your friends about what you are going through! We hear the conversations. You are burdening them, and eventually they will leave.”* When it is my turn to go, Tracey tells me how my lack of eye contact

during today's circle was disrespectful, and she believes that my new found debilitating anxiety has turned me into a "mean personality."

My dad picks me up today. He asks about rehearsal. I keep my responses short, so that he does not realize that something is wrong. The conversation lasts 10 minutes. We sit in silence the rest of the way home. I feel guilty that I do not have much to say, but I know if I share how I was treated, they will report her, leaving me with no shot of the lead next year.

For the past three years I have worked tirelessly to get a lead role senior year. I have retaught the younger students dances and vocal harmonies backstage, I have gotten thrown into multiple musical numbers the week of shows due to my reliability, and I have had multiple solo musical parts and numbers. The department currently has me doing as little as possible so Tracey can make a point about my new found incompetence. Nonetheless, Tracey and I both know I am one of the strongest cast members, and by senior year she is going to need me in that role. I just have to hold onto that for six more months and prove that I am still the same perfect personality and performer that they once believed in a year before.

After I get home, my mom, sister, and I eat dinner. I eat my penne alla vodka until I feel nauseous. When my mom asks, I'm a little more honest about the day. I tell her about the circle conversation, but I exclude how I was the target. I have gotten good at lying.

I dread the walk back upstairs to my room. I have hours of homework waiting for me and a plethora of texts and snapchat messages that I have ignored. My other best friend, Lindsay, texts me asking when I will finally be free to hang out. Another from my grandma asking about where she can purchase tickets for the show. I do not respond to any. I simply have no energy. Instead of doing the homework I originally planned on doing, I doze off for hours until I check the time: 12 A.M. I should probably shower and sleep. I prepare to do this all over again on Monday.

**February 26, 2024**

Three years after walking away from the circle, I finally forced myself to share with my therapist of two years my horrible experience in high school theater. I speak for the full session until he asks me the one question I least expected: “*Emma, did you know there are multiple ways to be groomed?*” Stunned, I stare at my computer screen in complete silence. My therapist and I are miles apart, yet he has never been closer to my mind. Palms sweaty, eyes watering, I try to remember what exactly happened before and after that Saturday Rehearsal back in 2020, slowly piecing together the signs of abuse.

Stage one: *targeting the child*. First, the clear mentorship. Kimo took Sarah and I as his apprentices. He told us he wanted us, and that there were reasons he picked us. Second, Tracey specifically chose me to focus on. Believing in me at first, so my skin was numb in time for the knife to reach my back. Both adults intensely kept their eyes on me throughout practice, sometimes giving glares to one another after, and would find me after rehearsal consistently.

Stage two: *gaining our trust*. Kimo established early on how deep our mentorship would be. We came to him with everything at first, and he gave us the comfort and advice we needed to continue confiding in him. Creating jokes only the three of us could understand and establishing sarcastic rapport between us that Kimo knew reminded me of home was bait. Kimo told me I was a miniature version of him, while Tracey told me I have potential and star quality— both clear signs of envy, which happens to be the biggest cause of emotional grooming. To this day, I wonder if any of what they said was true.

Stage three: *isolating the child*. There were countless closed door conversations between me and Tracey or me and Kimo— the ones we were threatened early on about sharing with others. I went to Kimo and only Kimo when I needed someone to vent to. Kimo told my friends to steer

clear of me because “I suck the energy out of a room,” which is why I never saw Sarah and Angelina throughout rehearsal. Anyone who could help was out of reach. My friend group outside of theater did not know. My dad did not know. My mom did not know. I could not get a therapist because that would raise flags with my parents, and both Tracey and Kimo knew that I did not have the means to get one.

Stage four: *maintaining control*. When Tracey told me I was not kind, charismatic or funny anymore, I believed those traits were true and gone for good. Finally and worst of all, Kimo successfully helped my best friend, Sarah, leave me the day after graduation, sending her a voice memo through text on how to drop me. I can not trust adults anymore. And I will never feel safe in most friendships again. Tracey and Kimo won control, holding me in a steel tight grip that I have been unable to escape for the past four years. I now realize I was simply another casualty in a text-book definition, chain of abuse that started when Tracey groomed Kimo when he too was sixteen. I never meant a thing to either adult. Although I have physically left the circle, you can never escape a cycle once you become a part of it. *But at least the cycle ends with me.*

Spoiler: I never got the lead role. COVID-19 ruined any opportunity because you can not do a show with K-95s and social distancing. But truthfully, I think COVID may have saved my life. Eventually a life full of *sleep deprivation and bloodshot eyes, a sense of constant humiliation, and social withdrawal from all of my school friends and family* would catch up to me, and I am glad I had escaped by the time it did. I have not gone near a stage since February 2020, and I hate that I never will.

Four years after leaving the circle, I finally got myself back. I am kind (most of the time), I am charismatic, and I am funny. I got my dream job, and I have proven to be a good leader as I

hold multiple Executive Board positions and teach Yoga Sculpt, treating those I lead right.

People, including adults, believe in me, and even though it took a while, I most importantly

believe in myself. *The cycle has ended with me.*