**Peace Circles and the Joint Session**

I have written a lot in the past about how rewarding it is to be a Distinguished Fellow in the International Academy of Mediators (IAM).  I recently attended its Toronto Conference which was entitled Resolving Conflicts: A Canadian Perspective and it was a privilege to be part of a presentation focusing on the Aboriginal Peace Circle aka Justice Circle.  Here’s how it works: one of the participants has committed an offense against another participant.  It is essential to understand that this is not litigation or a courtroom.  No typical rules of process and the offender is not innocent until proven otherwise.  In fact, he/she must take responsibility for the offense.  Next, the circle has four rounds of discussion, with peace pipe, talking stick and all.  Round one: recount the circumstances.  Round Two: apologies and discussion of individual failures in terms of who and how they have failed the victim and the accused.  Round three: how behaviors will be altered so as to avoid future transgressions.  Finally and perhaps most important is round four: how the community can change to alleviate future problems.  It was breathtaking.

Such events are a common occurrence among the aboriginal citizens of Canada and serve as a model for community involvement and responsibility in the conflict resolution process.  Importantly, they validate for me something that I have been “preaching” for over a decade; namely, that the truest and most meaningful conflict resolution is not merely where we can “close the deal”, but also where the community of those affected can meaningfully pivot to the future.

The next time someone says they don’t want to have a joint session in mediation, think of the Peace Circle and how those around us may benefit from a managed, difficult discussion and how we might rely on the mediator to be that manager.