

A COMPANION TO THE CULTURE WAR CODE

The Circle Guide

Six conversations for book clubs, faith groups, workplaces and integral circles that want to disagree better, across politics and across generations.

Based on **The Culture War Code**: How to Make Peace at the Kitchen Table (and Maybe Save the Country Too)

by **Jamie Murray**



START HERE

How a circle works

A circle is a book club with a practice built in. People read a few chapters, meet for about 90 minutes, and try the book's tools on a real topic while a host keeps things safe and on track.

THE ONE IDEA BEHIND IT

You don't have to become a wiser person before you can do what wise people do. The book's core move, asking **"What is this person protecting right now?"** and saying it back fairly, can be learned and practiced by anyone. A good structure is like a handrail: it lets ordinary people climb stairs they'd hesitate to take alone. This guide is that handrail.

WHO SHOULD BE IN THE ROOM

6 to 12 people, plus a host. The circle works best when the room is mixed: different politics, different faiths, different generations.

The invitation rule. Each person who joins invites one person who sees the world differently than they do, by politics or by age. If everyone already agrees, you have a support group, not a circle.

WHAT YOU NEED

- A copy of the book for each person
- This guide for the host
- A timer, name cards and pens
- The cut-out cards at the back, one set per person
- Something to eat. It's a kitchen-table book.

THE HOST'S JOB

You are not the teacher, the referee or the expert. You are the host. Your job is to:

- Keep time, so every voice gets room
- Read the agreements aloud at the start
- Model the master question, especially when things heat up
- Stop the exercise when someone is flooded or unsafe
- Stay curious about every side, especially the one you disagree with

If you lean strongly one way, consider co-hosting with someone who leans the other way.

THE SHAPE OF EVERY SESSION (90 MINUTES)

10 min	Open. Read the agreements. One-sentence check-in round.
15 min	From the book. Two or three questions about the chapters everyone read.
45 min	Topic of the Day. Practice the tools on a real topic, in pairs, triads or the whole circle.
10 min	Debrief. "What did you learn about what someone else is protecting?"
10 min	Close. Each person names one thing to try before next time.

Circle agreements

Agreements make hard conversations possible. Read them out loud each time, even when everyone knows them. Ask for a nod or a "yes" from each person before you start.

1. **We ask before we start.** Any exercise begins with "Would you be willing to try something?" Anyone can pass, anytime, without explaining.
2. **We speak from our own lives.** "I" and "my family," not "they" and "those people."
3. **We listen to understand, not to answer.** During the Peace Treaty there are no rebuttals, no convincing and no problem-solving.
4. **No contempt, in either direction.** No mocking, eye-rolling or labels for the other side. "Bigot," "snowflake" and their cousins stay out of the room.
5. **Colors are for understanding, never for labeling.** We can say which colors we lead with ourselves. We never tell someone else what color they are.
6. **What's shared here stays here.** Stories leave the room only with permission. The lessons can travel.
7. **Anyone can say "pie."** Borrowed from Sarah's family in Chapter 6: when anyone says the exit word, the topic is done for the night, no questions asked.
8. **Phones away.** And if something from your feed comes up, give it ten seconds and a check before you share it.

BEFORE ANY HARD TOPIC: FOUR QUESTIONS (FROM CHAPTER 8)

The host asks these privately before choosing a topic, and the circle can ask them together. If the answer to any of them is yes, slow down or choose another topic.

1. **Is someone being harmed?** Translation looks for the need under a behavior. It never excuses the behavior.
2. **Is translation being used as a weapon?** "If you really cared, you'd let it go" is pressure, not understanding.
3. **Does everyone want to understand, or does someone want to win?** Translation takes willing people.
4. **Is a wound still open?** A fresh loss or betrayal may need time before anyone can hear anything.

THE SIX SESSIONS AT A GLANCE

The arc of the circle

The sessions follow the book's four parts: **Decode** (sessions 1 to 3), **Translate** (4 and 5), and **Decide** and **Widen** (6). The Topic of the Day starts gentle and gets harder as the circle builds trust.

#	Read before	Focus	Topic of the Day
1	Introduction, Chapter 1	Same hardware, different software: the five needs and the spiral of values	Gentle: "What's the right age for a first phone?"
2	Chapters 2 and 3	When you arrived: generations, history and the windows of growing up	Cross-generational: "What did 'normal' look like when you were 20?"
3	Chapter 4	Turning the map around: your coordinates and your own triggers	Local: a real issue in your town, school or congregation
4	Chapter 5	The tools: the Translation Formula and the 5-Minute Peace Treaty	Medium: a family or workplace fight that keeps coming back
5	Chapter 6	One fight, start to finish	Hot: immigration, or a topic the circle chooses together
6	Chapters 7 to 9, Conclusion	Getting unstuck, honest limits, and taking it to town	The circle's choice, plus what comes next

CHOOSING THE TOPIC OF THE DAY

- **Pick something the room actually disagrees about.** If everyone nods, it's not practice.
- **Start local, then go national.** A school-board fight is easier to translate than a presidential race, because the people in it are real to you.
- **Frame it as a question, not a verdict.** "What should our town do about short-term rentals?" invites stories. "Why are short-term rentals ruining our town?" picks a side.
- **Check the four questions** on the previous page. Skip any topic where someone in the room would be debating their own right to exist or to be safe.
- **Good candidates:** immigration, phones and kids, school library books, AI and jobs, policing, faith in public life, the cost of housing, what young people owe their elders and what elders owe the young.

1 Same Hardware, Different Software

Read before: Introduction and Chapter 1 · Bring: the Spiral card

Purpose: meet each other as people before anyone meets as opponents, and learn the book's two big ideas: we all run on the same five needs, and we put them in different orders.

10 min **Open.** Read the agreements. Check-in: "Your name, and one dish that means family to you."

15 min **From the book.** Use the questions below.

45 min **Topic of the Day: "What's the right age for a first phone?"** Each person answers in one sentence. Then go around again: "Which of the five needs (safe, belong, fair, free, meaning) is your answer protecting?" Last round: each person looks at the Spiral card and names the one or two colors they lead with, and the one they find hardest to be around.

10 min **Debrief.** Did anyone's answer make more sense once you heard what it was protecting?

10 min **Close.** Try this week: when someone annoys you, silently ask the master question before you answer.

QUESTIONS FROM THE BOOK

- The book says most culture-war fights are good people protecting different things. Where does that ring true in your family? Where does it not?
- Which color's "at its best" description surprised you, because it described someone you usually argue with?
- What changed between 2000 and 2026 that you feel at your own table?

HOST NOTES

People will want to type each other ("You're so Orange"). Gently redirect: we name our own colors, never anyone else's. Colors are patterns that show up in everyone, not boxes. Keep the phone topic light; its job is to teach the move, not to settle the question.

2 When You Arrived

Read before: Chapters 2 and 3 · Seating: pair people across generations

Purpose: see how the year you were born, the mood of the country when you came of age, and the age you were when big things happened all shape what feels "normal."

10 min **Open.** Agreements. Check-in: "Your birth year, and a song from when you were 16."

15 min **From the book.** Use the questions below.

45 min **Topic of the Day: the Cohort Bridge Conversation** (Chapter 2). Pair people at least ten years apart. Each asks the other: What was the first technology that felt like the future? What world event first made the world feel bigger than your own life? What was the mood of the country when you were 20? Listen without correcting. Then each pair finds one thing they share despite the different tools, and finishes the sentence: "That helps me understand why you see ____ differently." Pairs report back.

10 min **Debrief.** What did you learn about someone else's "normal"?

10 min **Close.** Try this week: have the Cohort Bridge Conversation with a relative or coworker from another generation.

QUESTIONS FROM THE BOOK

- Think of the generation you find most exasperating. What was the country's mood when they were 20? When you were?
- Chapter 3 says the same event lands differently depending on how old you were. What event in your family proves it?
- The book calls these coordinates, not boxes. Where do you not fit your generation's reputation?

HOST NOTES

Generational jokes are fine; generational contempt isn't. If someone says "Boomers always..." or "Gen Z can't...", ask what that generation was protecting when it formed that habit. The book is honest that generational labels are rough and contested (see its Skeptic's Corners); use them as conversation starters, not verdicts.

3 Turning the Map Around

Read before: Chapter 4 · Bring: a pen and a quiet five minutes

Purpose: point the map at yourself. The relative who gets under your skin fastest is often pointing at the language you most need to learn, which the book calls your translation edge.

10 min	Open. Agreements. Check-in: "One belief you hold that you could not have held at 18."
15 min	From the book. Use the questions below.
45 min	Topic of the Day: a local issue. Choose something real in your town, school or congregation. First, five quiet minutes: each person writes their four coordinates (values, generation, history, development) and one line on who in this debate gets under their skin, and why. Then go around: each person states their view in one sentence and names what it protects. Second round: each person names what the side they disagree with is protecting, as fairly as they can. The people on that side say whether it was fair.
10 min	Debrief. Was it harder to describe the other side fairly, or to hear yourself described?
10 min	Close. Try this week: notice one moment of "heat" in yourself and ask whether some of it is yours.

QUESTIONS FROM THE BOOK

- Sarah's hardest line on her map was the one about herself. What's the hardest line on yours?
- What quality do you criticize most in others? Is there any of it you've disowned in yourself?
- Chapter 3 contrasts "I am a traditional family man" with "I value tradition and family." Which of your beliefs do you hold the first way?

HOST NOTES

The book is careful here, and you should be too: not every strong reaction is shadow. Sometimes a person really is being cruel, and anger is telling the truth. Shadow work asks only whether some of the heat is yours, never whether someone deserves how they're treated.

4 The Tools

Read before: Chapter 5 · Bring: the Translation Formula and Peace Treaty cards

Purpose: practice the book's two main tools until they feel usable while nervous.

10 min	Open. Agreements. Check-in: "One small comment that once turned into a big fight."
15 min	From the book. Walk through the five steps of the Translation Formula together, using the quinceañera story.
45 min	Topic of the Day: a fight that keeps coming back. In pairs, each person describes a recurring family or workplace fight. The partner builds a Bridge Sentence: "You're protecting _____. They're protecting _____. Both of those matter." Then switch pairs and run the 5-Minute Peace Treaty on a mild disagreement between the two of you: the Guess, the Story, the Loop, the Check. The host times each step.
10 min	Debrief. What did your Guess get wrong? (That's the Check working.)
10 min	Close. Try this week: one Peace Treaty with someone you trust, on a low-stakes topic.

QUESTIONS FROM THE BOOK

- Which step of the Translation Formula do you skip when you're angry?
- The Peace Treaty asks for a story, not an argument. Why might a story land where a statistic bounces off?
- Chapter 5 warns that translation that's really manipulation gets noticed. Where's the line for you?

HOST NOTES

The Loop is the step people rush. Insist that the listener keeps going ("So what matters to you is ____, because _____. Did I get that right?") until the speaker says yes. If anyone gets flooded (racing heart, hot face, rehearsing comebacks), call a break. Chapter 5 says the body needs at least twenty minutes to settle.

5 One Fight, Start to Finish

Read before: Chapter 6 · Topic: immigration, or one the circle chose together last week

Purpose: take the tools into the kind of fight that splits families, the way Sarah's family did, including the parts that go wrong.

10 min	Open. Agreements, read slowly. Remind everyone of the exit word. Check-in: "One thing you're protecting when this topic comes up."
10 min	From the book. Ray and Emma: what was each one guarding?
50 min	Topic of the Day, in three rounds. Round 1, triads (20 min). Groups of three, mixed by view where possible. Two people run the Peace Treaty; the third keeps time and watches for rebuttals. Rotate once. Round 2, fishbowl (20 min). Two or three people who lean one way sit in the middle and talk about what they're protecting and what they fear, while everyone else only listens. Then switch. No responses, only listening. Round 3, the Bridge (10 min). The whole circle tries to write one Bridge Sentence that both sides would call fair.
10 min	Debrief. What did you hear from the other side that you hadn't heard before?
10 min	Close. Each person names one rule from Sarah's family they'd like to adopt at home.

HOST NOTES

Expect heat; that's why this session comes fifth. If contempt shows up, name the agreement calmly and ask the master question out loud: "What are you protecting right now?" If someone shares that the topic affects their own family directly, thank them, check the four questions, and let them choose whether to keep going. Agreement is never the goal. Understanding is. Sarah's family left Chapter 6 still disagreeing, and the book counts that as a win.

6 Out the Door

Read before: Chapters 7, 8 and 9, and the Conclusion

Purpose: face the honest limits (some bridges can't be built yet) and decide how each person will carry the practice into their family, workplace and town.

10 min	Open. Agreements. Check-in: "One moment since we started when you used the master question."
20 min	From the book. Use the questions below.
35 min	Topic of the Day: the circle's choice. Run one last round of the Peace Treaty in new pairs, on any topic the circle picks. Then go around: "What's one bridge you'll try to build, and one boundary you might need to hold?"
15 min	The Check. If your circle is using the before-and-after page, fill it in now and compare with session 1.
10 min	Close. Decide together: meet again? Start a new circle? Each person says one word for what they're taking home.

QUESTIONS FROM THE BOOK

- Chapter 7 says change usually comes when life outgrows our old software. Where is life asking you to grow?
- Chapter 8 calls a protective boundary the "Sacred No." When is a boundary the wiser choice than a bridge?
- Chapter 9 argues that integral moves don't have to wait for integral people. Did you see that happen in this circle?

KEEP IT GOING

The warm feelings from a single conversation tend to fade within weeks or months; habits are what last. Circles that keep meeting monthly, with a new Topic of the Day each time, keep the practice alive. The best sign your circle worked: someone you invited invites someone else.

When it gets hard

What you see	What to do
Someone is flooded: a shaking voice, a red face, rapid talking	Call a break for everyone, so no one is singled out. Breathe. Come back in twenty minutes, or move on to another topic.
Contempt: a label, a sneer, an eye-roll	Name the agreement without shaming the person: "Let's stay with agreement four." Then ask, "What are you protecting right now?"
Someone is lecturing	Thank them, then: "Can you tell us the moment in your life that taught you this matters?" Stories open people; speeches close them.
The room splits into teams	Pause and summarize both sides in a Bridge Sentence. Ask each side whether it was fair. Then switch to pairs.
Someone describes being harmed	Stop the exercise. Thank them. Translation never excuses harm. Offer to talk afterward, and point to the help resources at the end of Chapter 8.
One person won't follow the agreements	Speak with them privately. A circle that can't keep its agreements can't keep its people. It's fair to ask someone to sit out a session.
You lose your own cool	Say so: "I'm getting heated, and I'm going to take a breath." It's the best teaching moment you'll have all night.

WHAT A CIRCLE IS NOT

It isn't therapy, a debate club or a recruiting drive for any side. It won't fix a family where someone is being abused, and it shouldn't try. If anyone is in danger, or in crisis, step out of the circle and get real help: in the U.S., call or text **988** for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at **1-800-799-7233**.

Pocket cards

The Master Question

"What is this person protecting right now?"

Everyone runs on the same five needs:

- to be **safe**
- to **belong**
- to be treated **fairly**
- to be **free**
- to have a life that **means** something

We differ in which we put first, and in what we do when one feels threatened.

The Translation Formula

1. **Pause and Decode.** Breathe. Check your own body first. Flooded? Take twenty minutes.
2. **Find the Need Underneath.** Which of the five needs is this person protecting?
3. **Build the Bridge Sentence.** "You're protecting _____. She's protecting _____. Both of those matter."
4. **Speak Both Languages.** Say it in terms each side would call fair.
5. **Plant Seeds, Don't Force Fruit.** Aim for one moment of understanding, not a conversion.

The 5-Minute Peace Treaty

"Would you be willing to try something for five minutes? We each guess what matters most to the other, tell one story, and say back what we heard. No arguing."

1. **The Guess.** In one sentence, what matters most to the other person about this?
2. **The Story.** One moment from your life that taught you why this matters. A story, not an argument.
3. **The Loop.** "So what matters to you is ____, because _____. Did I get that right?" Repeat until yes.
4. **The Check.** Name one thing your Guess got wrong.

No rebuttals, no convincing, no problem-solving. Anyone can pass.

Circle agreements

1. Ask first. Anyone can pass.
2. Speak from your own life.
3. Listen to understand, not to answer.
4. No contempt, in either direction.
5. Name your own colors, never anyone else's.
6. What's shared here stays here.
7. Anyone can say "pie."
8. Phones away; ten seconds before you share.

CUT OUT AND SHARE

The Spiral card

Condensed from the book's Appendix A. The colors come from Don Beck and Chris Cowan's Spiral Dynamics, which grew out of Clare Graves's research. They're patterns in people, not boxes for people: most of us lead with one or two, visit the others, and slide back under stress.

Color	Motto	At its best	How to speak to it
 Beige	"I must survive moment to moment."	Drops every quarrel to meet a real emergency	Meet the physical need first. Triage, not therapy.
 Purple	"The spirits of our ancestors protect us."	Rituals, stories and meals that tell people they belong	Honor the rituals, work through the elders, use stories.
 Red	"I am strong and will take what I want."	The courage to break a harmful pattern	Be direct and steady; offer a challenge, not an order.
 Blue	"Life has meaning when we follow the one true way."	Keeps promises and honors duty	Respect the structure; show how change keeps faith with the values underneath.
 Orange	"I succeed through strategy and scientific thinking."	Solves real problems with evidence and effort	Bring the data, show the payoff, respect their time.
 Green	"We're all connected and every voice matters."	Notifies who isn't being heard and makes room	Make room for every voice; feelings before facts.
 Yellow	"I flex to what each situation naturally requires."	Uses rules, results, care and firmness, each where it fits	Give them the full complexity and let them think out loud.
 Turquoise	"We are the universe experiencing itself."	A calm presence that holds a whole group as one	Fewer words, more presence. Let the conversation find its pace.

THE FOUR COORDINATES (CHAPTER 4)

Values: which colors do you lead with? **Generation:** when did you arrive? **History:** what season was the country in as you grew up? **Development:** where are you in life, and which windows were open when big things happened? Use them for curiosity, never for classification.

OPTIONAL

Before and after: the circle's own Check

Want to know whether your circle is working? Fill this in privately at session 1 and again at session 6. It's informal, not a scientific study, and nobody has to share their answers. Many circles find the comparison the most moving part of the last night.

Question	Session 1	Session 6
On a scale of 0 (cold) to 100 (warm), how do you feel about people on the other side of politics from you?		
Your Guess: in one sentence, what matters most to people on the other side about the Topic of the Day?		
What share of the other side do you think holds its most extreme views? (0 to 100%)		
How many conversations with someone you disagree with did you have last month that didn't end in a fight?		
The Check (session 6 only): what did your first Guess get wrong?		

The book reports that most Americans overestimate how extreme the other side is, often by about double (Chapter 9). Watching your own number move is the perception gap closing, one person at a time.

If your group wants to share its totals (never individual answers), the host can add them up and pass them along to the author. A few dozen circles' worth of numbers would tell a story worth telling.

FOR INTEGRAL AND SPIRAL DYNAMICS GROUPS

The circle lines up with Ken Wilber's five practices. The Pause is a small taste of **Waking Up**. Learning to look *at* your beliefs instead of through them is **Growing Up**. Noticing the different kinds of intelligence in the room is **Opening Up**. Working your translation edge is **Cleaning Up**. Taking in every perspective on the Topic of the Day is **Showing Up**.

One request: invite people who have never heard of any of this. A circle's real test is whether it works for them. Integral moves don't have to wait for integral people.

Start a circle

All you need is a few people who disagree, a table, the book, and this guide. Start with one evening. If it goes well, do six.

This guide is a companion to **The Culture War Code: How to Make Peace at the Kitchen Table (and Maybe Save the Country Too)** by Jamie Murray.

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