

Nature of Council

Written for a training by Gigi Coyle

Often people ask me when and where did I learn council? What was my first council? I find myself going back to my earliest memories of childhood – times when I felt alone, lonely, not part of a neighborhood with many other kids. On top of that, we were driven to school so the friends made there were left once the bell rang. I took refuge in the woods and it was there, in the seemingly infinite forest behind our suburban New England home, that I made community. Old boards and bottles formed the inner shelves of my sanctuary. Rocks, branches and other local, “trash” items, made my tables, benches and living room. I would design and decorate, sing and sit and then wait for who would show up.... robin; chipmunk, a neighbor’s lab and even, one memorable day, a skunk. These friends formed my council – contributed and participated in the endless conversations I would have with myself and them. Each had a message, a place, a role in the journey – a journey that seemed to continue for years, though probably went on for one at most.

It must have been when I was 5, around kindergarten time, as I recall vividly, the class practice of “Show and Tell.” I brought a bottle - so old and faded and beautiful - from my hideaway to pass around and have everyone hold. This was the first circle I remember with humans there. There was true attention – where I felt seen and heard. The talking piece worked well – I was able to tell my story and others joined in, once they held the bottle too. I brought them into my world and through the field created I was able to meet them in a new way. We shared what we cared about, what was special to us, what was sacred in “show and tell” council. I remember how interconnected everything felt. I remember the power of listening, of telling story, of speaking spontaneously from the heart. I remember the nature of council; that everything was part of the circle, not just the humans, but that chipmunk that visited each day helping me through the gate of loneliness.

As I sit in council today with people of all ages, I ask them when and where in their life do they remember an experience of council. Many at first say, “No, oh no, there was none of that in my family or school.” But then, gradually, a few strains and stories begin to emerge with similarities to mine.

“I was visiting my grandparents every Sunday and it was so amazing. They would stop everything and for hours the world would revolve around me, the three of us really. Not that it was a formal circle with a talking piece or dedication – but the spirit of council was there. My grannie would notice everything about me that had changed from the week before. Every story I told she would follow with one of her own and the hours moved into a timeless dream. This was the time I remember in my life of first feeling seen and heard. This was when I felt a love and connection that could be described as unconditional.”

And then more stories would follow - ones of pain and loss as well as joy. There are those where a place, a rocky outcrop at the end of a beach, served as a nest, a home, a meeting place for more than one 6-year-old. Or the animals that became the confidantes, the healers, the community for those in the city as well as those on the farm. What is exciting about these memories is that they are our own, not taught or given but natural; part of our human nature. They are cross-cultural, alive and to be found across national boundaries or even extreme religions. And if they are remembered and given attention to – like a seed or flower, they will grow, even multiply.

Council in nature is one way I know to remind people of the nature of council. As native elders so beautifully remind us, we are not separate – we are part of the great circle, great mystery and we can see this reflected every day we truly look and listen to all our relations. For young people, it is essential to have this be a part of their experience for without it, they will miss the magic the miracles, the connections, the wholeness that is available to all.

In every training I ask leaders, educators, therapists, teachers to remember and find the ways to share the full gift of council. Often in classroom situations we are so lucky to have the students listening to each other, we can forget the role and magic of the talking piece - a reminder of other forces at play in the field. To remember that the dimming twilight, the power of a lit candle, the direction we choose to sit in, the storm thundering outside is all effecting what happens.

There are many ways to bring this attention, awareness and teaching of wholeness, of nature into the classroom. Through topics, through exercises and activities. There is an infinite number of ways to expand awareness in this area. I have listed only a few ways at the end as a start and inspiration, knowing you can add and take off with many more.

Rather than focus on the classroom setting, I want to introduce some of the practices outside standard educational arena. Fortunately, there are many outdoor educational programs these days and more and more of them are incorporating a sensitivity to and connection with nature rather than a "use of". However, even here, nature is often seen and described, particularly in western culture, as something "other," something we "go to" or visit. On one level this is true, given development and the diminishing world of the wild. Yet the strongest message I hope to share, one again shared so beautifully by native elders, is that we must not forget the importance of listening to all our relations, not just the humans. For this to really sink-in, given modern day activities, I choose to take young people who wish to go on a rite of passage in nature – in the wild places.

This journey - modeled after the initiation rituals in Native American, Aboriginal, European and other earth cherishing cultures and religions – is one very much needed in modern times. I can remember wondering as a child - what Jesus was doing in the desert? Years later, as a young adult, I began to wander in such deserts and search for some direction. Like many youth, I was seeking something - acknowledgment, sense of accomplishment, recognition, understanding, meaning, purpose...maybe an edge, even a relationship to death. Not one word could describe it. In 1980 I was fortunate to meet Steven Foster and Meredith Little who had articulated it very well.

There is a need to be in council with elders, to be seen and heard and recognized as an adult. In the rite of passage, there is a mental, physical, spiritual test and the youth come back to tell their story. The days and nights, rocks, trees, stars, wind and sun all come to be their teachers. There is council with their peers, their family, the earth. Here, what it means to speak truthfully, heart-fully, comes quickly. The need to be better, cool or different quickly falls away. All have a chance to let go and leave behind that which no longer serves. All have a chance to wake up, as they never have before, with the dawn, reborn after a 3-day fast alone in the desert. And it is the council both before they go out, and after they return that offers their journey meaning.

The youth listen to each other's pain, challenge, frustrations and dreams and realize, they are not alone. Then they are alone in the great council of the wild place – filled with the voices too often blocked out by the city cars, malls and phones. And then, they are held in the council of elders, each one listened to and mirrored – their story given back to them as a myth for the year to come. With all phases completed - severance, threshold and incorporation – the council recognizes and welcomes each one into the adulthood.

This is but one of many life passages in which youth in particular are the focus, where council offers an essential element ... where the awareness of council existing everywhere, every day is heightened in that 3-day solo.... where the formal practice of council, giving each one deep listening and attention is essential. All quickly realize there is not one person or one story better than another. There is no room or need to embellish, lie or hide. Wholeness and the beauty of

differences are celebrated. Difficulties are part of the fabric and seem like a passing storm-front to be lived into fully. Fear can become an ally and safety, a way of life while walking the edge.

The youth that come on these quests, tend to return to the work years later - in some way as a teacher, a leader, parent, or guide. They are not healed forever or without flaws or faults – they are however, grounded in the seasons of change - in the deep knowledge of the circle way of thinking, walking and living. What they have accomplished is with them forever and on their worst days in life - a tree, a star, a rock will remind them of their time – of who they are or why they are here or what is possible.

This is what we are told year after year. This is what we learn by sitting in council with these young ones. And so, we encourage the councils to continue, particularly at times of life change, even inside a classroom, in a home, a hospital, in a church, in a prison.

We include the youngest of children ... to honor their presence and make room for them. In the last year, I have seen a child give some of the most beautiful blessings for a mother about to give birth. That same child, I watched as she sat, with such presence and love, bearing witness to the death of one of her teachers. Both were councils, both places where, some might be worried it would be too hard for the child or too disruptive for the adult. And, just the opposite was true. In my experience, if we respect and honor the child and give them a role in the council, they in return respect the process and all present. Beyond that any so-called disruptions are quite often the sign from nature, a kind of “wild card”, the action that turns everyone upside-down and wakes us up.

Weddings, births, deaths, times of change, divorce, illness – too often we leave our children behind. These are nature’s cycles .This is life and the greatest learnings happen in their presence. Council offers a way for us to be there together, each fully who we are – parent, friend, child etc. - and give and share from that place. Council does not leave anybody out; the black sheep, the one too shy to speak up. The family, community or business dynamics have a chance to change each day a council is called.

For many years, some of us offered family quests where the kids supported the adults to go out and fast in the desert. Many speak of the separation that can arise, when either the parents or the kids come home from a transformative experience, where the others had not been present. On a family quest the kids make gifts, do their own journeys in the wild while the parents are away. But most important, there are part of the story council and able to hear and honor their parents in a way that too often waits until the last hours of life.

Any opportunity to bring youth and elders together through council is exciting to me. Again, yes, there are wonderful youth trips with excellent leaders and times when youth need to be learning totally on their own. Yet, given the times we live in - when the over-50 crowd has quadrupled – there is an incredible resource for some match-making with the youth that too many are describing as a generation lost to drugs, TV, violence and despair. I once was asked to offer a council with 13 indigenous grandmothers from around the world, who were meeting in Dharamsala with the Dalai Lama. I was actually miles away - with a large Bioneers conference in San Rafael, California, where I called a council to speak and pray with them each night over a live satellite link. This was a phenomenal use of technology and a special form of council. No speeches were prepared, only themes introduced, as 4 volunteer participants of a Bioneers conference sat with 4 of the grandmothers each night for 2 hours. A highlight for sure were the young people speaking from the heart and listening deeply to these wise women. The connection was palpable, as one asked how to reconcile – what he should do knowing - he had inherited land stolen from the Cree People. A Grandmother spoke to him, to us, with such love and presence – saying the past was the past and that we must go on finding a better way together. The courage it takes to name the wound, the pain,

the hurt, the crime; the courage it takes to own it, the courage it takes to forgive, the courage it takes to start again ... all touched in so few words over such a huge distance.

So yes, I say we need the youth and we need the old ones; we need the women, the men, the different genders, races and species. The more whole the council, the more whole our experience will be. And we need voices that are real, true, heart sourced.

Our leaders, politicians today, even many of educators are too often, lacking that voice. There seems to be a disconnect between what is being said and the expression on their faces. The talk in council rarely suffers from such. We need the microphones of the world to become the talking pieces – the listening pieces. What if each one elicited deep listening, truth, heart-speaking? Some years back, we did a film on one of the youth quests and were a little concerned about putting a council, a ceremony, on film. Would people act or not be fully themselves? The truth was the youth loved it. They used it well, feeling this was their chance to truly be heard - they took it seriously and entered fully in the spirit of council.

Councils offer more and more opportunities for prayer and action, for visions to be shared, for reconciliation, repair and healing to occur. In such settings, there is room for all....most especially perhaps the voices of those that have been least heard on our planet – the young, the old, the impoverished, the oppressed, the animals, the earth. As the Nature of Council is more and more remembered and realized by all peoples – Arabs, Jews, Natives, non-Native, Christians and Muslims – there is perhaps, hope.

At the closing of the Bioneers conference, I asked who had the last words or whatever was needed to close for our time in San Rafael. I took a breath and held up the mike to see if someone would take it. After a few special silent moments, the geese, who had gathered around our huge tent for 4 days, took flight together, sounding their call and passed directly overhead. All in formation, in beauty, in sync as the story goes, sharing leadership, caring for any injured. Another essential part of our council, reminding us that synchronicity is a natural, everyday possibility.

Suggested Summary Activities, Exercises & Topics

- 1. Ask your students or any youth you are with: when in their childhood do they recall an experience of council?*
- 2. Ask if they know of any from their ancestry or imagine any and tell the story.*
- 3. Hold a council with a topic and ask everyone to be particularly mindful of sound, movement, changes in the environment etc. during the council, especially during their time sharing. If a cloud comes over or a woodpecker lands outside the window or a siren goes off on the street. Ask for them to weave that into their sharing, giving it meaning or not, to recognize it as part of their story.*
- 4. Ask the council to bring a talking piece from their home, their land, their environment and use it as part of their sharing – explaining why it is appropriate or meaningful to them and how it relates to the given topic.*
- 5. Spend a classroom period outside and ask the students to see if they can find any circles or spirals in nature and bring the story of that exploration back. This is even possible to do in an inner city.*
- 6. Ask the students what they know of the 4 directions - earth, air, water and fire - and to name some of the qualities and characteristics of each. Ask them to sit in a direction and to take on the quality in some way.*
- 7. Work with themes and activities related to the 4 seasons – not imposing your own ideas as much as allowing the youth to bring theirs. Have councils appropriate to the changing seasons and topics introduced accordingly.*
- 8. List the ways nature and council are similar – a mirror for each other.*

9. *Create a council of all species á la John Seed & Joanna Macy and listen to what nature, a whale or spider has to say.*
10. *Send your group out for a walk alone in silence for 2 hours with a topic or question. When they return, ask them to tell the story of what they did and what they saw and how that provides information or an answer to their question.*
11. *Invite your group to find a place they feel called to, comfortable in, in the natural world and spend time there – at least an hour. Return with a story about the place and experience.*