COUNCIL OF ALL BEINGS

by the Institute for Humane Education

PURPOSE

What does a mountain wish for? A wolf? A cow? A river? Participants “become” a being or part of nature and share their lives, concerns, hopes, and wisdom, talking as their "being" in a Council. This is a great way to widen perspectives, build appreciation and compassion for all beings living on the planet, and think about the impact of our actions on people, animals, and the natural world.

GRADES: 4 and up

TIME: 60-120 minutes depending on how much preparation is done and if students do research prior to convening of the council.

PREPARATION

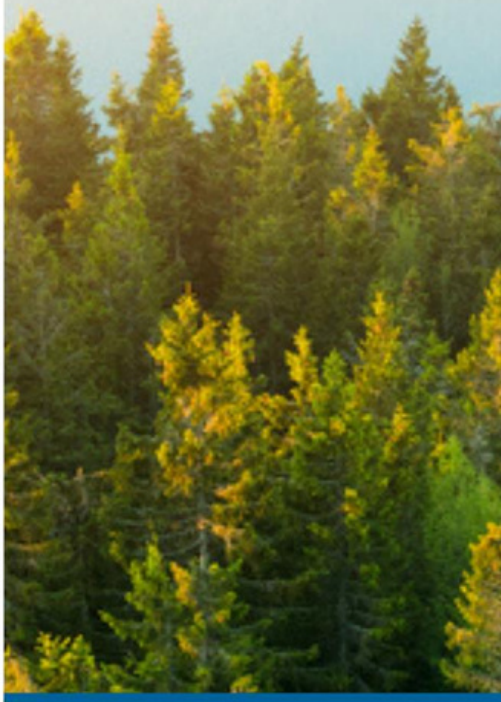
- You will want to convene the Council in a quiet place outdoors or in a room where you won't be disturbed with ample space to set up a circle that includes all students who are participating. (NOTE: You will want to avoid convening the Council in a room with fluorescent lighting. It is helpful to shut overhead lights off and use a small lamp if you will be doing this activity in a classroom. You want to establish a serious mood for the Council.)

- Art supplies for making masks and for identity signs: poster board, construction paper, paints, crayons, stones, shells, or other found and recycled objects, scissors, glue, any other art supplies that you have.

SOURCE INFORMATION

This Council of All Beings is modified from "Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings" by Joanna Macy, Arne Naess, John Seed, and Pat Fleming. This book describes a Council that happens over many days, not during a class period. It is possible, however, to do a meaningful short version of this powerful activity.

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LESSON SEQUENCE

1. Explain the entire Council before beginning, so that students know what is going to happen. Emphasize that silence (in between the spoken comments of Council members) is an important part of the sanctity of the Council.

2. Invite students to sit or lie down so that they are comfortable. Ask them to close their eyes, and let the image of an animal (human or nonhuman), or part of nature or landscape, come to them in their imaginations. Remind them not to force themselves to think about a certain animal or part of nature, but rather to let the being visit them in their thoughts.

3. Ask the student to “become” the being that has visited them in their imaginations. Ask that they feel themselves turning into this animal or part of nature (such as a cloud, a mountain, a tree, a wolf, a spider, or another human). Ask them: "What is happening to me as this being? How do I feel? What is my life like? My days? My nights? My interactions with other beings? With my environment? What do I want? What do I have to say? What would I like to tell people? What wisdom do I have as this being?” Remind them to listen inside themselves for the answers.

4. After giving students some time to really "become" their being, bring the art supplies into the center of the circle and invite students to open their eyes and silently to make a mask to represent themselves as this being. The mask does not have to look like the being, as long as it feels like it is representative. Some participants will be tempted to spend a long time on their mask. Remind them that the mask is only a representation, and give a five-minute and one-minute warning for finishing the mask.

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5. When everyone has finished their mask, invite everyone into the circle wearing their masks. Indicate that the Council is starting.

6. One by one, each being should introduce him-, her-, or itself and say what their life is like, who they are, and how they spend their time. After each being speaks, the Council should respond as a chorus by saying, "We hear you ____ (name of being)."

7. Ask the beings to each speak again, this time telling the Council what is happening to them, including what people have done to them and what they would like to say to people. Once again, the rest of the group responds by saying "We hear you ____ (name of being)."

8. After each being has spoken again, ask them to talk once more, sharing whatever wisdom, knowledge, or gifts they have to offer and what they might teach people who are willing to listen. The group responds by saying "We thank you ____ (name of being)."

9. Finally, after each being has spoken for the last time, ask participants to remove their masks one by one. As each of them takes off the mask, invite them to turn their masks toward themselves and make a small promise to change one aspect of their life which hurts the being they spoke for.

10. The Council ends when you say something like "These promises made shall not be broken. We give thanks to the beings who have come together today to share their feelings, dreams, hopes, and wisdom."



TEACHING THE SOLUTIONARY FRAMEWORK?
You can use Council of All Beings as part of Phase 2: INVESTIGATE, steps 4 and 5.

Use a version of the Council of All Beings when you ask students to think about the impacts of the problem they are investigating on all stakeholders. You might ask each student to choose a stakeholder or stakeholder group and research the impact if the problem continues on that stakeholder. Then follow the instructions for steps 4-10 above with the stakeholder in mind. After the Council has concluded, you can discuss what points will be important to remember when they come to the point of developing solutions.

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