

COUNCIL OF ALL BEINGS

(Source: Adapted from Joanna Macy's Work that Reconnects)



creative action
I N S T I T U T E

AREA/S OF FOCUS Environmental education; problem-solving

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION Participants began by choosing a non-human Being (species or habitat) and develop messages about the concerns and challenges that species is experiencing in this time of ecological crisis and climate change. They make masks and costumes to embody the Being they chose. The theatrical activity has four stages. First, the species share their concerns and challenges with the audience. Then someone asks the species if they would be willing to support the humans by offering them their strengths and wisdom. In the third stage, the species offer their powers, support and encouragement for human beings to act on their behalf in order to preserve life on our planet. There is a ceremonial conclusion and call to action for the audience.

TARGET GROUP Students, community members, fishermen, parents, non-profits

INTENDED OUTCOMES To strengthen a sense of belonging and connection with the natural world; deepen our commitment to defend life in all its forms; increase awareness of the effects of climate change; experience the beauty and power of life.

TOTAL TIME 3 hours

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS 5-30

MATERIALS Mask-making recycled materials: cardboard or paper, tape, markers, scissors, glue, elastic; fabrics for costumes (optional); music and sound system; bell; talking object

SETTING Large room or outdoors

INTRODUCTORY FRAME

Share relevant information about climate change, global warming and the importance of

protecting the mangroves and species in extinction.

Possible talking points:

Through a capitalist economic system, a mechanistic worldview and mass consumerism of the modern age, we have set ourselves apart from the natural world. We use the earth as a commodity for our goods and markets, resulting in an ecological crisis that affects all species. We are in the middle of a massive extinction due to habitat destruction, toxic contamination and the unraveling of the ecosystems upon which all life depends. A part of our work is to heal this split with the natural world, to remember our inter-existence with all beings, and to find in the web of life the power and strengths that will help us to take bold and innovative actions on behalf of life.

The Council of All Beings was developed in Australia in 1985 with Joanna Macy, John Seed and other environmental activists as a way to step outside of our human identity and speak on behalf of other life forms. They can speak on behalf of a mountain, rainforest, oak tree, honeybee, dolphin, coyote, or any non-human being that comes to their heart and mind. A Council is a process in which people sit together in circle and speak from the heart. It is a powerful tool to widen our lens, reawaken our sense of solidarity with all life and gain fresh perspective on the damage our modern society is causing other species. A talking object is often used to pass around the circle and it indicates the person whose turn it is to speak. It can be a beautiful stone or stick or feather, whatever holds meaning for the group.

PROCESS

STEP 1 - Choose the non-human Being (a species or habitat)

- Participants individually choose a species or habitat they want to represent. This can be done as a group by calling out the names and listing them on a board, or it could be done as a result of a guided meditation.
- Students can do research on the species to understand more about their life, habitats and current challenges. This stage can be done in a half hour or it can be a much more intensive research process, depending on the time available and the context.
- Participants can also develop their key messages beforehand by writing in first person, speaking AS the species they have chosen. **I.e. Parrotfish:** “I am parrotfish and I am a very important fish for the reef because I am the one responsible for cleaning it. I keep the reef healthy for other species to live. We are essential to your economy because we provide you with delicious meat for you to sell and for your family to eat. However you are overexploiting me and killing my babies before they reach adult stage.”
- *Note:* If you are short on time, eliminate the research and have participants improvise when they speak on behalf of the non-human Being.

STEP 2 – Mask-making

- Lay out materials such as cardboard, pastels, color markers, glue sticks, tape, scissors, string, fabric, etc. on tables or ground cloths. People can also gather materials from nature if you are outside.
- Students make masks (and costumes if able) that represent their species.
- Using either cardboard, paper or cardstock, the students can cut out the shape of the face or body of the being and paint or draw on the front.

- Staple or glue elastic to fit the mask to the student's head.
- Fabrics and other natural materials can be used to decorate the mask as well as to create a costume.
- Invite participants to put on their mask and practice moving as their life form. You can ask questions like:
 - What shape are you?
 - How much space do you take up?
 - What is your skin or outer surface like?
 - How do you see the world?
 - How do you move or how are you moved by other forces?

STEP 3 Council of all Beings

- Ring a bell or use a drum to invite participants to come to the Council "in character."
- Once everyone is in the circle, the guide (also in his/her adopted life form), welcomes them to this Council to talk about what is befalling their earth and their lives.
- Invite everyone to go around the circle and identify themselves in a brief ceremonial way. Provide an example: *"I am River and I speak for the waters of the world."*

THREE STAGES OF THE COUNCIL

- Speaking at random or passing a talking object around the circle, the Beings are invited to express the particular concerns they bring to the Council. For example, *"As River, I want to tell you about the mega-dams that are being built which block my flow and the migration of the fish who live within me. I have so many toxic and chemical substances that it is no longer safe to drink my waters. I used to be the source of life, and now I am the source of illness and death for so many."* The rest of the Beings in the Council are invited to respond with *"We hear you, River."*
- After a while, the guide reflects that all the suffering that the Beings describe seem to derive from the activities of the human species and their modern industrial ways. *"It would be good for humans to hear what we have to say. Let us summon them to our Council to listen only. Would five or six of you put down your masks and move to the center to be humans?"* The guide beats the drum and humans come to sit back to back in the middle, facing outward and are to listen without responding. From now on, they are addressed directly: *"Hear us humans. This is our world, too. And we've been here a lot longer than you. Yet now our days are numbered because of what you are doing. Be still and listen."*
The humans listen silently as the Council continues. After a time when numerous Beings have spoken directly to the humans, the drum or bell sounds again and other humans are invited to replace the ones in the center.
- When all the Beings have had a chance to address the humans, a major shift occurs. The guide may reflect, *"For all their machines and apparent power, the humans now are frightened. They feel overwhelmed by the destructive forces they have unleashed. It does not serve our survival for them to panic or give up, for truly our lives are in their hands. If they can awaken to their place in the web of life, they will change their ways. What strengths and gifts can we offer to them now?"* Now each Being has the chance to offer to the humans the strengths and gifts inherent in each life-form. *"As River, I offer you my ability to flow and provide life-giving nourishment to all who come into contact with you."*

Ending the Council can happen in a variety of ways. Some wind up reflectively in silence. Others can end with vigorous drumming and dancing. In whatever way the Council ends, a formal releasing of the Being they adopted should take place, thanking them for the privilege of speaking for them and letting the identity go.

STEP 6 – Reflection

Invite the group to reflect on what it was like to embody and speak as another life form

- What did you learn about the environment and climate change?
- What actions do humans need to take in order to protect and restore our environment?
- What kinds of powers and strengths can we draw on from the non-human world?

STEP 5 Community performance *(optional)*

- Do a rehearsal with their masks to practice projecting their voices and conveying their messages to an audience. Remember to work with the students to incorporate body language and movement in order to give more character to their beings.
- This can be staged in a variety of ways: students can stand in a half circle open to the audience or in a line so that the students step forward when it their turn to speak. It can also be developed into a play with a storyline.
- The audience can respond to each Being with the following statement when they finish speaking: “We hear you.” (The facilitator may need to prompt them to respond at the right time.)
- Share concluding remarks with the audience, such as: “We want to preserve our planet without pollution, without garbage, and without oil drilling. We want to see all of these species for a long period of time and the only way we can do this is with your help. Are you ready to take action?”
- Make sure to provide specific ways for the audience to get involved!