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Edited by

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- See also: Anthropology as a Source of Nature Religion; Bateson, Gregory; Blackfoot Cosmos as Natural Philosophy; Indigenous Environmental Network; New Age.

## **P** The Council of All Beings

The Council of All Beings is a communal ritual in which participants step aside from their human identity and speak on behalf of another life form. A simple structure for spontaneous expression, it aims to heighten awareness of our interdependence in the living body of Earth, and to strengthen our commitment to defend it. The ritual serves to help us acknowledge and give voice to the suffering of our world. It also serves, in equal measure, to help us experience the beauty and power of our interconnectedness with all life.

### **History**

The form originated in Australia in early 1985, when I was on a workshop tour bringing group practices to sustain social and environmental activists. One day after a weekend workshop, John Seed, founder of the Rainforest Information Center, took me to one of the last vestiges of his continent's primordial forests, saved from the timber companies by blockades mounted by John and other local protesters. On that excursion John and I discovered that we shared a passionate interest in deep ecology and the writings of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess about the "ecological self." As Buddhists, we both resonated with these concepts, finding them close to the Buddha's core teaching on the interdependence of all life. John expressed the wish that my workshops include a "deep ecological" group experience to directly challenge the anthropocentrism of industrial society.

So together, that day, we invented the Council of All Beings. It was introduced shortly afterwards, in the course of the weeklong training that culminated my workshop tour. At a camp north of Sydney, on huge flat rocks by a waterfall, some forty people took part. And soon they were taking the ritual back with them to their local communities.

Within a year, by word of mouth – and through John's and my travels – the Council of All Beings spread to North America, Western Europe, and Japan. From the Grand Canyon to the banks of the Rhine, in redwood groves and classrooms and church basements, people were

gathering to shed their personae as humans and give voice to the plight of the Earth. They spoke as whale and wolf and wind, aspen and marsh and any other nonhuman they felt called to represent.

Articles about the ritual soon appeared in a variety of publications, and by 1988 a book by us both, with Arne Naess and Pat Fleming (*Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*) carried the practice more widely, especially among activists, religious groups, and environmental educators. These publications helped people from different cultures and walks of life to guide the Councils in a recognizably consistent fashion.

### Description

As the practice spread, the name “Council of All Beings” came to be used in two ways: to refer to the ritual itself, and also to refer to the workshop or gathering in which it is held, and which includes closely related processes. Since two of these related processes are considered by many to be important, if not essential, to the experience as a whole, they are included in the following description.

### The Mourning

The interdependence of all life remains just a mental concept, without power to affect our attitudes and behaviors, unless it takes on some emotional reality. We need to feel it, and our capacity to feel is stunted, if we block out the pain within us over what is happening to our world. Furthermore, if we proceed to take part in the Council *per se*, speaking on behalf of other life forms, without first acknowledging our sorrow for what other beings are suffering at human hands, we risk being superficial, even presumptuous.

Here we use “mourning” as a generic term for the expression of moral pain for what humans are inflicting on the natural world. This pain for the world includes not only grief, but fear, anger, and despair as well. Because these emotions are not encouraged in conventional society, and because they reveal the truth of our interconnectedness with all life, we allow them full play.

For the Mourning, a variety of forms have evolved, in which people feel both safe and free in expressing and releasing their pain for the world. The methods I like best are simple ones: a recitation of the names of endangered species, with drumbeat and pauses for people to name what is disappearing from their lives today. Or the Cairn of Mourning, where, gathered in a circle, people move to the center, one by one, and place a stone. Each stone represents a loss that has occurred or is occurring. As it is brought forward, the loss is described: a family farm replaced by a shopping mall, a fishing stream polluted or paved over, clean air, safe food . . .

Reconnecting us with our capacity to care, such ritual namings of the losses brought by our industrial culture serve as an antidote to the pervasive psychic numbing this

culture incurs. They also serve to awaken us to the interconnectedness of all life forms, our deep ecology. I have come to see deep ecology as an explanatory principle both for the pain we experience on behalf of the natural world, and for the sense of belonging that arises when we stop repressing that pain.

### Remembering

Our connections with other life forms are based not only on emotional attachments to places and beings we have loved. They are also organic, woven by shared ancestries, embedded in our bodies. Each atom in each molecule of our being goes back to the beginning of life, and has belonged to far more ancient and varied forms of life than our own. The human form we now wear is just the latest and briefest chapter of a long evolutionary journey. In the Remembering, we consciously own this ancient kinship so that, when the time comes to speak for other life forms, we can do so a greater sense of naturalness and authenticity.

Also known as “evolutionary remembering,” this experiential process guides the imagination while drawing on multiple senses and inner body knowings. It sets our present-day, hurried lives within larger contexts of time. On occasion, the Remembering extends back to the beginning of space and time, drawing on texts such as *The Universe Story* by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, and ritual adaptations by such teacher-practitioners as Sr. Miriam MacGillis. But as a preparatory stage to the Council of All Beings, we usually focus on “our life as Gaia”; it is easier to feel with our bodies, and we have already done it in our mother’s womb. Just as, *in utero*, we physically recapitulated the evolution of cellular life, so now we attempt to do it consciously, harnessing intellect and imagination.

Instead of relying on words alone, sound and movement help us to “remember.” A heartbeat on a drum, evoking life’s rhythms, as it pumps our blood, breathes through our lungs, can take us back through time, helping us imagine we can recall the adventures of our four and a half billion years. Our evolutionary journey can also be explored through bodily movement, even the barest of motions. Nosing, crawling, wriggling, pushing up, we imaginatively feel our way into the inner body sense of fish and amphibian and reptile, life stages still embedded in our neurological system.

As your memory improves, as the implications of evolution and ecology are internalized and replace outmoded anthropocentric structures in your mind, there is an identification with all life. Then follows the realization that the distinction between “life” and “lifeless” is a human construct. Every atom in this body existed before organic life emerged. Remember our childhood as minerals, as lava, as rocks? (John Seed)

The expanses of time evoked by the Remembering remind us that the industrial growth society is a temporary episode – and that in order to move beyond it now, we can draw on a more deeply rooted legacy. Respect and gratitude arise for our forebears' capacity to weather adversity and to respond collectively and creatively to enormous challenges. The process helps us to believe that these capacities have not forsaken us, and to draw on them now at this crisis point for life on Earth.

In my years of experiencing and guiding this process, I have seen how it strengthens us to act in defense of Earth and Earth's beings. It helps us act, not from the whim or nobility of our short-lived individual ego, but clothed in the authority of our four and a half billion years. We start learning to act our age.

### Speaking for Other Life Forms

This is the Council of All Beings *per se*, enhanced, when time permits, by the preparatory practices described above.

The beings that coexist with us in the web of life are profoundly affected by our actions, yet they have no hearing in our human deliberations and policies, no voice to call us to account. The Council of All Beings gives them a voice – and because it is our own as well, it can change the ways we see and think.

Participants begin by letting themselves be chosen by another life form, be it animal, plant, or natural feature like swamp or desert. We use the passive verb, *be chosen*, in order to encourage people to go with what first intuitively occurs to them, rather than selecting an object of previous study. This way our minds are more receptive and humble, more open to surprise. When out-of-doors, we can wander off alone to happen on the identity we will assume. When indoors, some quiet moments suffice, as we relax and wait with an open, non-discursive mind for the imagined presence of another life form. Then we take time to behold this life form in our mind's eye, bestowing upon it fullness of attention, imagining its rhythms and pleasures and needs. Respectfully, silently, we ask its permission to speak for it in the Council of All Beings.

If time allows and supplies are available, we make simple masks, working together in companionable silence with paper and paints, twigs and leaves. Then, briefly clustering in small groups, we practice taking on the identity of our chosen life form. This helps us let go of our self-consciousness as humans, and become more at ease in imagining a very different perspective on life.

Then, with due formality, the participants assemble in a circle and the Council of All Beings commences. To create a sense of sacred space, prayers and invocations are spoken. Native American practices, such as smudging with sage or cedar, and calling in the blessings of the four directions, are often used here to good effect. When I am the guide, and speaking, of course, as my adopted life

form, I like to begin the proceedings by inviting the beings to identify themselves in turn, a kind of roll call: Wolf is here, I speak for all wolves. I am Wild Goose; I speak for all migratory birds.

Welcoming them all, I thank them for coming, and, with some solemnity, set the theme for our deliberations.

We meet in council because our planet is in trouble; our lives and our ancient ways are endangered. It is fitting that we confer, for there is much now that needs to be said and much that needs to be heard.

The council unfolds in three consecutive stages. First, the beings address each other, telling of the changes and hardships they are experiencing in these present times.

"The shells of my eggs are so thin and brittle now, they break before my young are ready to hatch."

"I'm tightly crowded in a dark place, far from grass and standing in my own shit. My calves are taken from me, and instead cold machines are clamped to my teats. I call and call for my young. Where did they go? What happened to them?"

"As Lichen, I turn rock into soil. I worked as the glaciers retreated, as other life-forms came and went. I thought nothing could stop my work; but now I'm being poisoned by acid rain."

The second stage of the Council begins after most have spoken, and the guide invites humans into the center. Since it is clear that one young species is at the root of all this trouble, its representatives should be present to hear these testimonies. So, a few at a time, the beings put aside their masks and move to sit for a while, as humans, in the middle of the circle. The other life forms now speak to them directly.

"For millions of years we've raised our young, rich in our ways and wisdom. Now our days are numbered because of what you are doing. Be still for once, and listen to us."

"See my possum hand, humans? It resembles yours. From its print on the soft soil you can tell where I have passed. What mark on Earth will you leave behind you?"

"Humans! I am Mountain speaking. For millennia your ancestors venerated my holy places. Now you dig and gouge for the ore in my veins. Clearcutting my forests, you take away my capacity to hold water and release it slowly. See the silted rivers? See the floods? In destroying me, you will destroy yourselves."

The first time I sat in the center, a human in the presence of other life forms, I felt stripped. I wanted to

protest. "I'm different than the logging and mining executives, the multinational CEOs, and the consumers addicted to shopping," I wanted to say. "I am a caring human; I meditate and recycle and teach deep ecology."

But because I was not permitted to speak, these words began to evaporate in my mind. I saw them soon as essentially irrelevant. The deep ecology that had so lured me with its affirmation of our interconnectedness with other species now forced me to acknowledge my embeddedness in my own. If I was linked to the wild goose and the lichen, I was far more linked to the investment speculators and compulsive shoppers. Shared accountability sank in, leaching away any sense of moral immunity.

Then, as the others did, I moved back to the periphery, to see and speak from that wider context. From here I could see more clearly than before the isolation in which humans imagine themselves to exist, and the fear and greed than can seize them.

In the third stage of the Council, the other life forms offer gifts to the humans. Recognizing how dependent they have become on humankind, they would help this young species deal with the crisis it has created. As ritual guide I might cue this stage by saying,

Many humans now realize the destruction they are causing; they feel overwhelmed and powerless in the face of the forces they have unleashed. Yet our fate is in their hands. O fellow beings, what strengths of ours can we share with them, what powers can we lend them?

With this invitation, the beings in the Council begin spontaneously to offer their own particular qualities and capacities.

"I, Lichen, work slowly, very slowly. Time is my friend. This is what I give you, humans: patience and perseverance."

"I, Condor, give you my keen, far-seeing eye. Use that power to look ahead beyond your daily distractions, to heed what you see and plan."

One after another the beings offer their particular powers to the humans in the center. After speaking, each leaves its mask in the outer circle and joins the humans in the middle, receiving the gifts still to be given.

"As Mountain, I offer you humans my solidity and deep peace. Come to me to rest, to dream. Without dreams you lose your vision and hope. Come, too, for my strength and steadfastness, whenever you need them."

"As Leaf, I would free you humans from your fear of death. My dropping, crumbling, molding allows fresh growth. If you were less afraid of death, you would be readier to live."

These gifts reside already in the human spirit, as seeds within the psyche; otherwise they could not be spoken. Their naming brings forth a sense of wholeness and glad possibility. When all of them have been offered, the Council of All Beings is formally concluded. Then the assembled often break into singing, drumming, exultant dancing – releasing energy after the long, attentive listening. Sometimes the group just sits in stillness, silently absorbing what has been learned or writing in journals.

Care is taken to thank the life forms, who have spoken through us, and to dispose of the masks in a deliberate fashion. The masks may be formally burned, or hung on a tree or wall, or taken home with us as symbolic reminders of the ritual. On occasion, at the close of a Council, wanting to stay identified with the other life forms, we fancy that we are putting on human masks, the better to work for them as we reenter the world of the two-leggeds.

### Reflections and Applications

The Councils of All Beings, that I have personally experienced, number in the hundreds by now. I can think of nothing I would give in exchange for them – nothing that equals their mixture of laughter, tears, and eloquence, or that can replace the spontaneous insights they engender. Sometimes, as I start to offer the ritual, I fear that people will reject it as beneath their dignity, as childish or a waste of their valuable time. But in each case, when I proceed with quiet confidence, the outcome is similar. Whether in Nebraska or Germany, Russia or Japan, people seem ready and able to step free from their human roles, if only for an hour or two, and give voice to wider, more ancient knowings.

The quality and effectiveness of these rituals vary widely, of course. Because there is no required training for the guide, or "quality control," they can, on occasion, become diffuse, distracted, even boring. Yet, by and large, there is something irreplaceable that happens in the simple act of taking on – or even attempting to take on – the persona and perspective of another life form. It is basically an act of humility and generosity. It moves the self-important ego from stage center, and sheds a fresh light on even the most ordinary elements of life.

According to theologian Thomas Berry in *The Dream of the Earth*, the "shamanic personality," which can understand and speak for other life forms, is essential to our survival. It helps us to break free from our culture's anthropocentrism and dispel the trance of industrial civilization. The life-giving powers shaping creation from the beginning of time are still present within us, Berry writes. They exist as "deep spontaneities," accessible through the imagination.

The Council of All Beings has shown it can evoke these deep spontaneities. Here no fasting or drugs or arduous disciplines are needed to awaken the inner shaman. The Council does not claim to involve channeling or

shapeshifting, or to engage any capacities beyond the moral imagination. All that is required is clear intention; it is like opening a door in the mind and walking through. At times people do experience another voice “coming through” that is beyond any conscious editing on their part. This is not surprising, given the close relation of this work to the shamanic experience.

While the processes described above require a measure of uninterrupted time – a few hours for the ritual circle itself, a full day or two with the related practices – briefer applications have evolved. In church services and celebrations of the mass, abridged versions of the Council of All Beings have, on many occasions, functioned as the sermon or liturgy of the word. As enrichment to environmental education, the Council has occurred in countless settings, from elementary and high school classrooms to graduate schools of architecture and urban planning, where students speak for the flora and fauna affected by a building project they are designing. Inspired by their experience of the Council, concerned citizens in several countries have appeared at public hearings on waste disposal and mining, lumber, and other resource extraction projects; and, with or without masks, they have testified on behalf of the non-human dimensions of life that these plans will affect. People are also choosing to represent our fellow species as listening presences in community meetings, and marchers in town parades. All these current practices attest to our readiness and capacity to break through our society’s anthropocentrism, and give expression to the ecological self.

Joanna Macy

#### Further Reading

Macy, Joanna and Molly Young Brown. *Coming Back to Life*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1998.  
Seed, John, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess. *Thinking Like a Mountain*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1988.  
See also: Breathwork; Deep Ecology; Deep Ecology – Institute for; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Epic of Evolution; Macy, Joanna; Pure Brethren; Radical Environmentalism; Re-Earthing; Seed, John; Yoga and Ecology.

### **P** Covenant of the Unitarian Universalist Pagans

The Covenant of the Unitarian Universalist Pagans (CUUPs) is a branch of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) dedicated to networking among neo-pagan members of the UUA. Its goals include promoting inter-faith dialogue, developing neo-pagan religious beliefs and practices and integrating them into UUA services. As a

networking group, it has no specific beliefs or practices other than the broad eclecticism and acceptance of spiritual paths characterized by the UUA and by the neo-pagan movement as a whole. In some communities it is seen by neo-pagans as a meeting and recruiting ground for groups as diverse as the OTO and Wiccan covens.

CUUPS emerged in the 1970s as a result of feminists’ critique of what was considered the patriarchal orientation of Unitarian Universalist (UU) spirituality. In response, the UUA General Assembly passed the “Woman and Religion Resolution” in 1977 and introduced concepts such as the goddess and a more Earth-centered spirituality through a class offered in many UUA churches. This movement made connections with the growing neo-pagan movement, as Margo Adler noted in *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979). CUUPS received its charter from the UUA in 1987, and became attractive to neo-pagans who were middle class and professionals and, during the “Satanic Panic” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, were looking for protection and legitimacy from an established religious organization.

CUUPS had a mixed reception in the UUA. Many congregations were heavily influenced by an atheistic movement in the 1960s, and were as opposed to pagan theology as to Christian theology. However, CUUPS has grown rapidly in numbers and influence within both UUA and in the neo-pagan movement. In 1993 it was able to get the UUA to include goddess and Earth-centered spiritual material in its hymnal, and by 1995 convinced the UUA to adopt the following statement as the “sixth source” of UU spirituality: “Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

CUUPS membership appears to have two distinct groups, UU-pagans and Pagan-UUs, based on whether the members started as UUs or as neo-pagans. The UU-pagans tend to be older and more socially integrated while the Pagan-UUs tend to be younger and more countercultural. Pagan-UUs are much less likely to attend regular Sunday services, but rather will focus on evening activities and are more likely to introduce energetic activities when the group sponsors the Sunday service. This is most apparent in the national CUUPS meetings, where Pagan-UUs will be more likely to engage in late-night drumming and dancing while UU-pagans will turn in early.

CUUPS has also had a mixed reception within the neo-pagan movement. It has primarily appealed to the more Wiccan and Earth-centered branches, and to the more socially integrated portion of that branch. It went through a period of instability in the mid-1990s that resulted in a more activist and Pagan-UU leadership. It is currently regarded as one of the larger organizations that constitute the neo-pagan movement.

Marty Laubach