

Earth-Centered Traditions

Lesson 7: Death and Ancestors in the Circle of Life

3.25.2018

Objectives: Explore death in earth-centered traditions and perform two *Samhain* traditions.

Materials: Lesson attachments, turnips, pumpkin, carving tools, tealights, kindling/dry grass/leaves, wood, matches, fire extinguisher.

Time allotments are suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins):

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ Do you know where your ancestors come from? Where?
 - ▶ Sign your name if you have ever attended a funeral or burial.
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: Would You Rather...? (5 minutes max)

In the classroom, there will be a selection of cards with questions “Would You Rather...?” Read a few questions aloud and ask the youth to physically move themselves to designated places in the room based on their answers (so standing vote). Give each cluster a few minutes to chatter about their reasons.

Example: *“Would you rather be confined to your room for one year OR go wherever you want but always have to wear a giraffe costume?”*

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: *“We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”*

Teacher reads: (from Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux 1863-1950)

“You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round.

In the old days all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain and the north with its cold and mighty wind

gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion.

Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle. The sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were.

The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children."

- 4. Joys and Sorrows** (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of *meeting* one another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation's *Embracing Meditation* will be made available to your class. Share this information, putting in stones for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

- 5. Beliefs About Death: The Lakota Tradition** (20 minutes)

Pass out "Beliefs about Death and Mourning" self-inventory sheet. Ask youth to complete the inventory and total their scores. After they have tallied answers, see where youth range, from highest to lowest scores. Inform youth that ALL these beliefs are core understandings of the Lakota tradition, and higher scores may suggest greater alignment of one's own beliefs with the Lakota.

Using the teacher version of the inventory containing additional notes (attached), review each item of the inventory and ask for show of hands to see who agrees with each belief. Share additional information as you review each item with the class.

Questions for discussion:

- Does anyone connect with death in a personal way, through the death of a family member, relative, pet, friend, or neighbor?
- Death remains something of a taboo in American culture, and we often live with little thought or attention given to death, *quite unlike many places in the world!* How often do you think of death? What feelings does it provoke?
- What do you do with those feelings or questions about death? Is there someone or somewhere that welcomes conversation about death and dying?

6. Go Outside for Two Samhain Traditions (25 minutes)

In another earth-centered tradition, the Wiccan tradition, the halfway point between the fall equinox and the winter solstice is called *Samhain* (pronounced *sah-win*). It is the predecessor of our beloved Halloween and a time to remember ancestors and acknowledge the reality of death.

- Make sure to extinguish the chalice before leaving classroom.
- Lead youth outside to garden/green space, taking materials needed for each Samhain tradition:
 - For *Jack-o-Lanterns*: turnips, carving tools, tealights
 - For *Needfire*: kindling/dry grass/leaves, wood, fire extinguisher, metal can, paper/pencil, and matches
- Invite youth to take turns reading aloud the first of two Samhain traditions, Jack-o-Lanterns.
- In the story, Jack makes a deal with the Devil not to come for his soul until much later, then constantly tries to evade death. Are there things in our culture today that suggest we too are trying to evade or make a deal with death?
- Invite youth to grab some tools and carve either pumpkins or turnips.

7. Kindling the Needfire (15 minutes)

- Invite youth to take turns reading aloud the second Samhain tradition, the Needfire.
- Like the Needfire that assured families would be safe from winter's cold, darkness, and hunger, what sources of hope, strength, and life have you seen at funerals, burials, or other rituals surrounding death?
- Follow instructions for starting the Needfire, and throwing into the fire youths' wishes/prayers for the coming season.

8. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the Jack-o-Lanterns and Needfires, saying together: *"May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts."*

**Youth are welcome to take their carvings. Please return all materials back to classroom.*

9. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- return blue/yellow stones to containers
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets