

# Earth-Centered Traditions

## Lesson 5: Animal Totems

3.6.2022

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**Objectives:** Explore animal totems and their relationship to the human.

**Materials:** Worship programs, lesson attachments, soap and carving materials, trays.

**Time allotments:** Suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 20 minute closing service (end class around 9:50/11:50 to begin chapel 9:55/11:55).

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### 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:
  - ▶ If you could, what animal would you most like to be?
  - ▶ From your most recent worship (likely Story Sunday, Feb 27), what’s one thing that you remember as interesting or meaningful?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.
- **Please take a few minutes to invite reflections from youth about their recent worship experience. Use copies of worship programs as helpful reminder.**

### 2. Opening Discussion (5 minutes)

- What have you heard, or know, about animal spirit guides?
- Can you think of examples of animal guides or familiars in modern books or movies? (Hint: *Harry Potter and the idea of a patronus* or the wizard’s animal companion of cat, rat, toad, or owl; *Golden Compass and the idea of daemons*—souls in the form of animals.)

### 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 cultural ecologist and author, David Abram)

*“What is magic? In the deepest sense, magic is an experience. It’s the experience of finding oneself alive within a world that is itself alive. It is the experience of contact and communication between oneself and something that is profoundly different from oneself: a swallow, a frog, a spider weaving its web...”*

#### 4. Animal Totems (10 minutes)

**Teacher introduces:** Many earth-centered religions have a spiritual place for animals in the human experience.

- A person or clan/group may have a particular animal that is sacred to them.
- Sometimes this animal reveals itself to the person in daily life, sometimes in meditation or on a special vision quest, and sometimes the animal is assigned to a person by shamans or elders.
- There are many names used for these animals, sometimes called **spirit guides, power animals, totems**, or (in neo-pagan traditions) often called “**familiars.**” *While these terms may have similarities, they do NOT mean the same thing and do NOT function in the same way across different earth-centered traditions.*
  - For example: an actual, living animal may feel like a “familiar” soul to someone, while a “totem” is usually an animal or nature figure that serves as a spiritual symbol for a group of people such as a family, clan, lineage, or tribe.
- The important point is that earth-centered traditions view nature as integrated with the social order rather than secondary to it.

#### **Question for discussion:**

- Why do certain animal totems appear to certain people and other animals to other people?

*(Hint: Think about how an animal totem might magnify a characteristic/ability that its person already has, or a particular power the animal embodies that the person has yet to find within himself. In Harry Potter, the **patronus** is an embodiment of the spellcaster’s innermost positive strength, such as joy or hope.)*

#### 5. “How to Find Your Animal Totem” (10 minutes)

- Pass out attached handout, and invite youth volunteers to read aloud the first page on finding your animal totem.
- Then ask youth to spend a few minutes in quiet, to think about the questions and prompts, and listen for their animal totems.

#### 6. Art activity: Carving our Totem (25 minutes)

In many earth-centered cultures, individuals carve images of their spirit guide and carry it with them as a reminder and invitation to that animal. The Lakota carved them out of pipestone, the Ojibwe used ironwood. We will carve totems out of soap, an easy medium to experiment with.

- Give each youth a ½ bar of soap. Set out tools on a tray and encourage youth to return tools to the tray for use by other sculptors as they finish with different-sized cutting blades. Follow instructions on the attached handout.
- As youth carve their totem, encourage them to talk about their animal with one another as much as they feel comfortable. Tell them that in some traditions, it is taboo to talk about your power animal, as this is a sacred relationship and meant to be kept secret.
- Allow **10 minutes** for youth to share their work with one another. In particular, invite youth to respond to these questions:
  - Why did you choose your particular animal?
  - Are animals and other nature figures integral to your world, or are they largely peripheral?

7. **Say goodbye until next time:** Extinguish the chalice, saying together: *“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”*

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

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