



Tower of “Me”sa: Spiritual and Self- Exploration Guide

Overview:

During the developmental years of college—and beyond—exploring one’s individual self and personal belief system is an important part of growth. This activity supports the issue of self and spiritual exploration, a Bonner Common Commitment, in a unique way, using the ideas of Native American culture and the meanings of animal totems. In the first portion of this two-part activity, participants will be challenged to think about and reflect upon their beliefs. The second part reinforces this heightened self-awareness by tasking students to create a totem that represents their individual characteristics.

Category:

Personal and Spiritual Exploration

Level:

Intermediate to Advanced

Recommended

Bonner Sequence:

This activity is most recommended for Bonner students who are exploring, experiencing, and formulating their personal beliefs.

expectation	explore	experience	example	expertise
		♥	♥	♥
Spiritual Exploration, Diversity				

Type:

Group discussion and individual/group collaboration of work

Goals of this Guide:

- Challenge students to think about their lives and identity using the metaphors of animal totems drawn from Native American ideals
- Guide students to reflect upon their individual beliefs
- Provide students with resources for self-identification and reflection regarding their own evident individual characteristics

Materials:

- Flip chart and markers (optional)

- . Writing paper
- . Extra writing utensils
- . Materials for Personal Totem Pole
 - . Nature/National Geographic magazines
 - . Pringles cans or some form of canister (students may then put Totem on their desk and use for storage)
 - . Paper machete optional
 - . Scissors
 - . Glue
- . Totem Animal Characteristics handouts
- . Optional: Portable CD player and Native American or other form of soothing music to play as students enter

How to Prepare:

As the facilitator, it is your job to facilitate questions for student reflection and a follow up group discussion. If possible, review the workshop in advance and familiarize yourself with the reflection questions and the Personal Totem exercise. (See Totem Prep Suggestions located at beginning of Part 2) Also prepare all materials and have them ready for easy distribution for exercises.

How to Do/Brief Outline:

Following is a very loose outline. Adjust the time allotted to each part as you find most effective.

This two-part workshop has the following parts:

1) Self-Identity Discussion and Reflection Questions	suggested time 45-60 minutes
2) Personal Totem Activity	suggested time 60-90 minutes
3) Follow Up Discussion	suggested time 15-30 minutes

Introduction to Activity:

You may wish to have Native American music playing in the background as people arrive. Explain to the students that one of the components of the Spiritual Exploration common commitment is self-exploration. College is a time characterized by developmental exploration of identity (but of course this quest for self-understanding does not begin with or end with college). This two-part activity first probes participants to think and reflect about their beliefs. The second part reinforces what they have reflected and learned about themselves when they develop a totem component that represents them and their individual characteristics.

Part I) Self-Identity Reflection and Discussion of Questions

Suggested time: 30 minutes

1. Ask participants to take out a pen (have extras available) and provide them with a blank sheet of paper.
2. Begin the workshop by asking students to take a moment to quiet themselves and put on their thinking/reflective caps.
3. Emphasize that during college years and beyond, it is crucial to reflect upon their belief systems.
4. Tell students that you are going to be asking a series of questions which they are to reflect upon.
5. They will have some time to write down any thoughts on the provided paper after you pose each set of questions.
6. Start with question set one. Pause for a few moments between each question to provide students time to think. Allow about five minutes for contemplation after each set of questions is answered. You may write the questions on a blackboard or flip chart as you pose each question.

Question Set One:

Does life matter? If so, how?

Does your life matter?

How do you make it matter? or What do you do to make it matter or give it meaning?

How do you identify ways to express what you believe?

7. Repeat Step Six for Set Two (Set Three and Four are optional).

Question Set Two:

To whom are we, as humans, accountable?

Is there a great being, higher power, higher authority that exists?

If so, how would you describe or identify it?

What happens at the end of life?

Is there a heaven?

When someone says that they believe in God, what thoughts come to mind?

Do you think God (with a capital G) or god (with a lower case g)

Do you feel a sense of commonality a difference? Why?

How do you conceptualize God?

8. As you see participants finishing up on question Set Two, tell students that they have 1-2 minutes to write down any last minute thoughts.

The following two sets are optional and suggested for experienced and/or religious affiliated schools.

Question Set Three:

How do we make the connection to a “higher power”?

Creation?

Where do you go to commune with your god?

Are there places where you feel more connected to the higher power you worship?
(church, nature)

Think about other experiences you’ve had during which you feel a strong connection with your god?

(When you hear children laughing, when you go Christmas Caroling, hear certain music...)

Question Set Four:

What does faith look like?

How do we know when we see it?

How do we identify people who are faith filled?

How do you decide if a person lives a life guided by faith?

What do they look like?

Do you talk about faith with your peers?

If so, is it difficult or easy to do? Why?

9. Ask participants to share any thoughts they may have for the two (or more) question Sets. (You can either divide students into groups if you have a large group or have everyone in the group discuss if you have a smaller group of students.)

Part 2) Personal Totem

(Adopted from st.aemilian.tripod.com/projects/totems)

Facilitator Notes for Introduction:

The main purpose of this unit is a “self-discovery” of one’s personal and behavioral mannerisms within their own culture. The participants will develop a personal “totem” that reflects their own beliefs in connection with those based on the Native American Studies of animal spiritualism and mythology. Facilitators should model good skills and do this assignment alongside the students.

Participants will look at descriptions of animals and their totem characteristics (see handout). These characteristics are metaphorical; not everyone will agree that these are characteristics of those animals. Participants will then consider themselves in light of these characteristics. Participants will review the different animals’

characteristics on the handout and then chose which animal they identify with the most. Participants will briefly write down which animals' characteristics they identify with most and why. Participants will then create a unique way to display this animal (i.e., drawing this animal, cutting pictures out of a magazine, etc.) on a totem.

Below is some additional information to use for additional Totem Pole reference.

Totem Notes:

Totem Poles are made out of cedar trees and traditionally painted with red, blue-green, black and white. Special animals with certain strengths are carved according to the owner. The beaver has a wide, distinctly marked tail, two large front teeth, and holds a stick between his paws. He has the power to heal and change the cold weather into mist. The beaver was a sign of wealth due to the fur trade. Another popular animal, the Killer Whale, has a wide mouth and a long, high fin. He is honored for his bravery and strength. It was believed that he could become a human with great power. The bear carving has large paws and claws, a short snout and large teeth. Often, he is carved with his tongue hanging out. For women, the bear gave them the power to work hard and to be good mothers. The bear gave men the power to be successful hunters. A large totem could take two to three years to carve. It was a great honor to have one, and a family might trade all they had for one.

Totem Poles:

An exploration: <http://users.imag.net/~sry.jkramer/nativetotems/>

A brief introduction: <http://www.evergreen-washelli.com/text/qa73l53l47.htm>

Totem Poles of the North American Northwest Coast Indians:
<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/guides/1985/6/85.06.01.x.html>

Types of totem designs: <http://www.nativewoodart.com/totem.html>

Characteristics of animals on totem poles: <http://www.lengendsofamerica.com/NA-Totems2.html>

Activities/Tasks:

Part I: Questions for Discussion and/or Research:

In this next portion of the activity, we will look at different types of cultures and some of their individual practices. As a group, discuss characteristics of people, themselves, the class etc:

- . How are the life and deeds of a person remembered in our society? (trophies, plaques, books, movies)
- . What kinds of qualities are remembered? (good ones)
- . When people die, how are they memorialized? (tombstone, eulogy, funeral, wake, mourning period)

- . Optional: How do other cultures memorialize their departed? (England- kings and queens buried in cathedrals, Egyptian royalty mummified with items for afterlife and buried in pyramids, Plains Indians buried on scaffold with items for afterlife, Anasazi buried in a closed-off room or in trash pit with items with items for afterlife, Northwest Coast Indians buried at top of totem pole). What accounts for the differences in the way we bury our dead?) (Religion)

Part 2: What Are Totem Poles

Describe the types of Totem Poles and use any of the reference information provided above to add to the discussion.

- . **Memorial Pole-** describes a special event (defeat, hunt, dream) or the life and deeds of a person or clan.
- . **House Pole-** The emblem (a sign or figure that represents something) of a family and tells what rights and privileges they have.
- . **Mortuary Pole-** a marked grave; at the top is a box that holds the remains. The carving below describes the person's rank and accomplishments.

How are Totem Poles similar to other ways people remember the dead? (It recalls their lives, deeds and strengths, it creates a record of their life).

How are totem poles different from other traditions that we remember our dead?

Part 3: Finding Your Animal Spirits

As a facilitator/presenter, you can decide if students will make their own individual totem poles with many animals that represent themselves, or each student will pick one animal and everyone makes a collaborative totem.

- . What type of animal(s) describe(s) you? What deeds and activities have you done that an animal could represent? For example, if you're clever and witty, these characteristics would be associated with a fox or if you're involved in dance and are graceful you could be likened to the characteristics of a swan
- . Make a list of characteristics that represent you; those behaviors that *you* believe are most important to you
- . Use the enclosed list to match your characteristics with the totem animals
- . Write a paragraph explaining why the characteristics match your chosen animal(s)

Part 4: Your Personal Totem

- . Once there exists a written record of your totem, you can identify which animal(s) you will put on your totem
- . Use the materials provided to make a totem representing you or your group

- . After the totem is complete, each student can present to the group what they discovered throughout this reflection activity about themselves

Part 5: Follow-up Discussion

As a facilitator/presenter after the totems are finished, bring group together to discuss/evaluate the findings of the totems. Below are some possible prompts to reinforce previous questions.

- . What type of animal(s) do you find best describe(s) you? What deeds and activities have you done that an animal could represent? For example, if you're clever and witty, these characteristics would be associated with a fox or if you're involved in dance and are graceful you could be likened to the characteristics of a swan
- . What characteristics did you discover represent you? Did these surprise you at all? Why or why not?

Handout: **Contemplation Questions**

Question Set One:

Does life matter? If so, how?

Does your life matter?

How do you make it matter? Or what do you do to make it matter or give it meaning?

How do we identify ways to express what we believe?

Question Set Two:

Is there a great being, higher power, higher authority that exists?

What greater being is out there?

 If so, how do you describe or identify it?

To whom are we, as humans, accountable?

What happens at the end of life?

 Is there a heaven?

When someone says that they believe in God, what thoughts come to mind?

- . Do you think God (with a capital G) or god (with a lower case g)
- . Do you feel a sense of commonality a difference? Why?
- . How do you conceptualize God?

The following two sets are optional and suggested for experienced and/or religious affiliated schools.

Question Set Three:

How do we make the connection to a “higher power”?

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Where do you go to commune with your god?

Are there places where you feel more connected? (church, nature)

Are there other experiences you’ve had during which you feel a strong connection with your god?

 (When you hear children laughing, when you go Christmas Caroling, hear certain music...)

Question Set Four:

In what or whom do you believe?

What does faith look like?

 How do we know when we see it?

 How do we identify people who are faith filled?

 What do they look like?

Do you talk about faith with your peers?

 If so, is it difficult or easy to do?

Totem Animal Characteristics http://www.legendsofamerica.com/NA-Totems.html	
Animals	Characteristics
Alligator	Maternal, revenge oriented, quickness, aggression, and basic survival instincts.
Ant	Group minded, determination, patient, active, and industrious
Anteater	Lethargy, curiosity, nosiness.
Antelope	Active, agile, jumpiness, and willing to sacrifice
Badger	Courage, aggressive, healer, having problems relating to others, and energy conduit
Bat	Rebirth, longevity, secrecy, initiation, good listener, and long life
Bear	Industrious, instinctive, healing, power, sovereignty, guardian of the world, watcher, courage, will power, self-preservation, introspection, and great strength
Beaver	Determined, strong-willed, builder, overseer, and protector
Bee	Organized, industrial, productive, wise, community, celebration, fertility, defensiveness, obsessive nature, and enjoys life
Buffalo	Sacredness, life, great strength, abundance, gratitude.
Bull	Insight into the past, fertility, rushing into things without proper preparation.
Butterfly	Metamorphosis, transformation, balance, grace, ability to accept change
Caribou	Traveler, mobility, preference to be nomadic, adaptability to adversity
Cat	Guardianship, detachment, sensuality, mystery, magic, and independence
Cheetah	Swiftness, insight, and focused
Cougar	Leadership, loyalty, courage, taking responsibility, foresight
Cow	Nourishment and mother figure
Cobra	Swift and decisive
Crab	Good luck, protection and success
Crane	Solitude, justice, longevity, independent, intelligent, and vigilant
Crocodile	Ensuring your emotions are displayed accurately/appropriately
Crow	Justice, shape shifting, change, creativity, spiritual strength, energy, community sharing, and balance
Deer	Compassion, peace, intellectual, gentle, caring, kind, subtlety, gracefulness, femininity, gentleness, innocence, and seller of adventure
Dog	Noble, faithful, loyal, teaching, protection, and guidance
Dolphin	Kind, salvation, wisdom, happiness, playfulness, prudent, capable of deep emotion, and happy
Dove	Cross-world communication, spirit messenger, peace, gentleness, love
Dragon	Longevity, richness, prosperity, infinity, wisdom, power, and fiery
Dragonfly	Flighty and carefree, strong imagination, higher aspirations.
Duck	Water energy, helper of seers, can clearly see/deal with emotions
Eagle	Divine spirit, sacrifice, connection to creator, intelligence, renewal, courage, illumination of spirit, healing, creation, freedom, and risk-taker
Elephant	Strength, power, affection, loyalty, royalty, and wisdom
Elk	Strength and agility, pride, majestic, independence, purification, strength, and nobility
Falcon	New beginnings, adventure, passion, and leadership.
Fish	Graceful, slyness, open-minded, quick to change one's mind.
Fox	Cunning, agility, quick-witted, diplomacy, wildness, feminine magic of camouflage, shapeshifting and invisibility
Frog	Water energy, cleansing, rebirth, sensitivity, medicine, hidden beauty, peace, adaptability,

	poor character judgment and power
Gazelle	Aggressive
Giraffe	Communication, intuition, attaining the unreachable, seeing the future
Goat	Surefootedness, stubbornness, independence, diligence, lack of foresight
Goose	Self-demanding, reliable, prudent, rigid, vigilance, parenthood, and productive
Gorilla	Family-oriented, intelligence, strength, environmental protector, keeps peace through aggression
Hawk	Messenger, intuition, victory, healing, nobility, recollection, cleansing, visionary power, and guardianship
Horse	Freedom, stamina, mobility, the land, travel, power, and freedom
Hummingbird	Messenger, timelessness, healing, and warrior
Jaguar	Chaos and shape-shifter
Lion	Family, strength, energy, courage, guardian and protector
Lizard	Conservation, vision, self-protection, hidden defenses.
Llama	Comforting to others
Lynx	Keeper of secrets, guardian, listener, and guide
Monkey	Ability to change the environment, health, success
Moose	Headstrong, longevity, steadfastness, and wisdom
Mouse	Scrutiny, order, organizer, and an eye for details
Opossum	Diversion, strategist, and deceiver
Otter	Playful, friendly, dynamic, joy, helpfulness, and sharing
Owl	Deception, clairvoyance, insight, messenger,
Ox	Sacrifice, chastity and self-denial
Panther	Protection, hidden emotions, introspection, caution, careful decisions
Parrot	Communication, beauty, guide for wisdom, mockery, thinking before speaking
Peacock	Immortality, dignity, and self-confidence
Porcupine	Innocence, companionship, and trust
Prairie Dog	Swiftness, industrious, constructive, preparedness
Puma	Companion on journeys to other worlds, grace, silent power
Quail	Group-work, team play, creator of harmony and group tolerance, protectiveness (especially toward children)
Rabbit	Fear, timidity, nervousness, humility, rebirth,
Raccoon	Curiosity and cleanliness
Rat	Fertility, stealth, scavenging, intelligence, enjoys luxury
Raven	Introspection, courage, self-knowledge, magic
Rooster	Vanity, likes to be showered with gifts and attention, early riser, settling for nothing less than the best
Salmon	Proud, intense, confident, wisdom, inspiration
Seagull	Versatility, loud, easy-going nature, creativity, laziness
Seahorse	Confidence and grace
Seal	Love, longing, dilemma, active imagination, creativity
Shark	Hunter, survival, and adaptability
Skunk	Reputation, presence, and strength
Snake	Impulsive, shrewdness, rebirth, transformation, initiation, and wisdom
Squirrel	Planner and gatherer

Stag	Lord of the forest, masculine power of regeneration, signs
Swan	Grace, balance and innocence, soul, love, beauty, of the self
Tiger	Strength, valor, power, and energy
Turkey	Generosity, life-giver, and sharer
Turtle	Nurturer, shy, and protecting
Weasel	Strength, energy, ingenuity and stealth
Whale	Wisdom, provider, intelligence, and kindness.
Wolf	Loyalty, perseverance, success, intuition, loyalty, and spirit
Woodpecker	Sensitive, protective, and devotion
Zebra	Agility and individuality