

SPIRIT TOTEMS

FOR SANDPLAY AND HEALING

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Recently my husband Peter and I went to the beach in the rain. There were only a few other people there. We were on a mission, in search of materials for my next Spirit Totem workshop to be offered at the International Expressive Arts Therapy Conference. We gathered seaweed, driftwood, shells and other treasures washed up from the sea. I felt a rush of excitement each time I spotted the familiar shape of a seaweed pod, a bamboo-like stretch of vine, a gnarled piece of wood, an oddly shaped rock or shell. In each of these discoveries I saw the potential for the "spirit being" that might be uniquely birthed in the creative hands of the participants in the upcoming workshop.

I was remembering with delight the spirit totems that emerged in my workshop at the Sandtray Network Conference in March (2000). I started this workshop with a brief presentation and slide show of a series of expressive arts groups I facilitated for individuals with life-threatening illness. Some of the projects the groups used in the process of exploration and creative healing were portable altars, masks and spirit dolls or totems.



I then invited the workshop participants to create a spirit totem, using a wide array of natural objects and art materials. I define a spirit totem (or spirit doll) as a ritual or sacred object that is imbued with a conscious intention or purpose which may be for healing, clarity or resolution about a specific issue, or the manifestation of a quality or concrete outcome that the creator wishes to bring into focus. However, just as in the building of a sandtray, the direction and meaning of the totem may unfold and become clearer during the process of making it or even after it is completed.

I gave an overview of the plethora of natural objects and art materials available and some basic instructions of how a spirit totem could be made. After a short centering meditation, the participants were free to play and explore. What followed was a frenzy of activity as everyone delighted in gathering what he or she needed.

Within a short period of time, the spirit totems began to take shape and by the end of the creative time, amazing "beings" had come to life. As I walked around the room witnessing this process, it felt as though the population in the room had increased. Some participants talked and laughed playfully, while others worked in silence. Some people shared as they were building. One woman shared that she would use her totem as a guide for her healing in an upcoming surgery.

When completed, the spirit totems were placed in a community sandtray for sharing. We rotated around very slowly breathing in these rich and varied new creations. The attention to detail in each spirit totem was precious and inspiring. One had two distinct faces and personas on the front and back, while another had two heads side by side. One was a fluffy lamb with delicate rosebuds and moss around its neck. Another was brilliantly painted curved branch brought to life. One had a striking long dark raffia hair with a feathered neck and a face painted on a seaweed pod head. Another had a white fleece body decorated with "jewels" and tiny shells, and a headdress made out of moss and feathers with gold stars. One participant tied a miniature basket to his spirit totem and placed seven small stones in it, one to represent each of his children. He later reported that he received a lot of attention and many inquiries about it at the airport while traveling home. He has hung his spirit totem on the door outside of his therapy office where it greets all who come to see him.