

CREATING AN IDENTITY SHIELD

A Storytelling Approach to Healing

By Joyce C. Mills, Ph.D. MFT, RPT-S

While teaching a workshop on the use of story, ritual, and ceremony for healing at the Warm Springs Tribe in Oregon, I had an intriguing discussion with Art McConville, a Native American who is an educator, artist, and spiritual leader from the Nez Perce tribe. Art told me how he uses shields in his work with troubled adolescents to help them reconnect to their own identities in a positive way. Art told me that, a long time ago, Native peoples used shields for different purposes such as in battle for protection or to identify who lived in each lodge. He said that rather than an address - such as 426 S. Elm Avenue, for example - which tells us nothing about the person or family within, each lodge had a shield decorated with feathers, animal fur, shells, and other natural elements. In essence, these symbols told the story of who lived within the lodge or tipi.

After we spoke, I began to think about using the concept of shields in my work. My hope was to provide a creative experience that would help each person identify and reconnect with those symbols that best represented him or her to identify and reconnect with who truly "lives within" - not with words, but with pictures - the oldest form of storytelling.

Since then shields have become an integral part of my personal life, as well as part of my work with children, families, and professional training. The following instructions are meant to be used as guides. Let your own creative imagination can flow freely and enjoy the discoveries.

DRAWING YOUR IDENTITY SHIELD

Use colored markers, crayons, or whatever drawing materials you prefer and draw a circle on a

piece of paper. Use any size paper that you have available, but try not to use anything smaller than 8 1/2 x 11.

1. Begin by asking your client (child, adolescent, adult, or family) to close his or her eyes, take a deep breath, inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth. After a moment or two ask them to imagine seeing the symbols that best represent him/herself - aspects of life and personality in terms of nature, hobbies, and interests. The following questions can be helpful to you in identifying those symbols. Ask: *What animal or bird most reminds me of myself?* For example, I (Joyce) identify with the butterfly the most because of my interest in transformational change, as well as with the eagle because of my belief in the importance of vision. A young woman with whom I work identifies with a turtle. She says that when she is threatened, like the turtle, she seeks safety from within.

If I were a part of nature, what would I be?
Do you think of yourself as a strong tree with many branches, a mighty mountain with peaks and valleys, a gentle brook, a raging river, a powerful ocean?

What are your hobbies or interests? A teenage girl with whom I worked remembered how much she loved being a photographer and drew a camera on her shield, while a psychologist in one of my workshops drew images of drums and a guitar because of his passion for music.

With these questions in mind, let each symbol that best represents an aspect of your personality emerge in your mind's eye slowly and comfortably. Maybe only one image will come to you or perhaps many images will flow forward. It doesn't matter. As Native American people tell me, *"It is all good."*

2. When the images are clear in your mind, open your eyes and begin drawing them within the circle of the Identity Shield.

CREATING A SHIELD IN THE SAND TRAY

Use same steps as above only draw a circle in the sand (use a round sand tray if available). Ask client to select miniatures instead of drawing the symbols.

CREATING AN IDENTITY SHIELD WITH REAL MATERIALS

Another option is to make an Identity Shield out of materials, such as fabric or hide, bendable branches or basket weaving straw, paints, feathers, beads, and so on. This can be done by an individual child, adolescent, or in a group situation. Materials also include the following:

- Thin bendable branches or basket weaving straw.
- Natural canvas cloth for the shield itself.
- Acrylic paints of various colors, and a diverse collection of feathers, beads, and yarns.

Bend the branches gently to form a circle. If need be, the branch can be soaked to provide more flexibility. When the hoop-like circle is formed, the ends are then fastened together with the yarn.

Next, cut a circle from the canvas slightly smaller in size than the branch hoop. It should fit inside of the hoop. Then fasten the circle of canvas to the branch hoop with the yarn in an over-stitch fashion. The last step involves holding the blank shield in their hands, closing their eyes, taking a few deep breaths, and letting the symbols which best represent them emerge. When these symbols come to them, ask them to open their eyes and decorate their shields.

When working in groups, we all work in one room and share stories, many spaces of quietness, laughter, song, and peace. The key is to unite the identities by valuing the unique contribution and attribute of each person.

Maybe as you make your own shield, you, too, will discover something important about yourself and reconnect to the symbols of your personal heart-magic.

1. Excerpted and re-edited for this newsletter from *Reconnecting to the Magic of Life*, (1999) Mills, Joyce C.