

Council of All Beings

speaking on behalf of the more-than-human world

Fields below map onto the Strand Bank. The guide follows.

TYPE

WTR — Work That Reconnects

PHASE

Seeing with New Eyes. Must come after the group has already touched its pain for the world — never as an opening.

DURATION

One hour at minimum. A full Council with mask-making runs half a day; it can fill a weekend.

GROUP SIZE

Works from about eight people upward. Large groups can be split into delegations.

NEEDS

Mask-making materials — card, markers, tape, string, fabric scraps, scissors — or nothing at all if you run the short version. A drum or something to call the Council with. Ground to sit in a circle, ideally outdoors.

SOURCE

Developed by Joanna Macy and John Seed for rainforest activists. Full description in ch. 8 of *Coming Back to Life*, Macy & Brown, New Society Publishers, 2014. Shared open-source; please credit it. workthatreconnects.org

What it is

People step aside from their human identity for an hour or two and speak on behalf of another life-form — a wolf, a river, a mountain, a patch of bog. It is colourful, sometimes solemn, and often a great deal lustier than anyone expects going in. What it grows is the ecological self: the sense, sitting somewhere below argument, that you belong to a wider body than your own skin. It also does something no amount of reading will do, which is let a room hear, from outside itself, what one upstart species has been up to.

It also does something no amount of reading will do, which is let a room hear, from outside itself, what one upstart species has been up to. Every Council is different because it is made entirely of whoever turned up. Some release torrents; others stay oddly light. And do not go reading the room by appearances — the person who looks most awkward in the mask, or who says almost nothing, is very often the one it went deepest with.

On playing it properly

There is a moment about four minutes in where the whole thing could tip. Someone has just been asked to make a noise as a heron, and they are a perfectly sensible adult who came here on a train, and you can feel the room deciding whether the next hour is going to be beautiful or excruciating. Which way it goes is very largely down to you.

I have got this wrong by being too careful with it — offering a tasteful little hum, framing everything very respectfully, keeping my own dignity intact — and then wondering why the Council that followed felt like a room of people politely describing animals rather than speaking as them. Dignity is the thing that holds you at arm's length

from the being you are meant to be inhabiting, and it is also, inconveniently, the thing most of us reach for the moment we get nervous.

So go the other way, and go first. Get properly stuck into the noises — the howls, the creaks, the wind through branches, the frankly ridiculous ones — and make yours a bad one, because a group will match whatever level you set and will never, ever exceed it. Offer them a modest little birdsong and a modest little birdsong is precisely what comes back.

And here is the thing I would ask you to trust, because it took me a while: the play is not a warm-up you get through before the real work starts, it is how the real work becomes possible at all. Once somebody has made a genuinely stupid frog noise in front of other adults, the risk has already been taken and the guard has already come down, and what arrives twenty minutes later can be devastating precisely because there is nothing left to protect.

So what would it take for your group to be laughing at itself inside the first ten minutes? And what are you still holding onto that might be standing in the way of it?

Councils very often begin in hoots and end in tears. Nobody in the room has ever once experienced that as a contradiction.

| *“This is going to feel daft for about four minutes. Let it. The daftness is the door.”*

Running it

1 • Invocation

Open with something that marks the threshold, so that everyone knows they have crossed one — the Beings of the Three Times, the Four Directions, a chant, whatever suits you and the people in front of you. If you reach for a ritual from a tradition that is not your own, go and ask somebody inside that tradition first. Borrowing without asking is precisely the habit this whole practice is trying to unpick.

2 • Being chosen

This framing does the heavy lifting, so give it carefully. People are not picking a species. They are letting themselves be chosen.

| *“Relax. Open your mind wide, like a radar dish. Stay with the first thing that arrives — don’t reach for something you know a lot about, and don’t reject what turns up.”*

Give it fifteen or twenty minutes walking outside if you have the ground for it, three to five sitting still indoors if you don’t. Anything non-human will do — plant, animal, or a feature of the land itself: a swamp, a mountain, a river, the particular oak at the end of the field.

Then invite them to see it fully and from every side — its size, its shape, the way it moves or is moved — and to ask its permission before entering it, so that they can feel its body from the inside rather than describing it from the outside. Last of all, ask the being how it would like to be represented, and what its mask might want to be.

3 • Mask-making

Half an hour, in silence, with a five-minute warning before the end so nobody is caught mid-antler. Card, markers, paste, tape, string, fabric, and whatever people bring back from the hedgerow. Masks can be tied on or taped to a stick and held up in front of the face.

One small practical thing gets missed almost every time, so say it twice: cut holes to see and to speak through. A magnificent mask sealed across the mouth produces a being nobody can hear, which rather undoes the entire afternoon.

4 • Moving and speaking as the being

Optional, and worth the time if you have it. Both parts loosen the self-consciousness that otherwise strangles the Council.

First, with eyes closed, invite people to move as their being. What shape are you? How much space do you take up? What is your outer surface like? How do you notice what's around you? How do you move, or how are you moved? Do you make sounds — play with them.

Then in threes or fours, masks on, each being speaks for three to five minutes: who they are, how it feels to be them, their particular strengths. Keep this to their nature and way of life as it has always been. Save present conditions for the Council itself.

The Council

Call the beings to the Council ground in character — a drum beat, an animal call. The guide, also in character, welcomes them and asks the question that opens it:

| *“What is befalling our Earth and our lives?”*

Each being identifies themselves first, one by one around the circle, before anyone speaks at length. This roll call matters — it establishes the register and stops the first speaker setting the whole tone.

| *“I am Wolf, and I speak for the wolf people.” “I am the Amazon River, and I speak for the rivers of the world.”*

Stage one — the beings speak

At random, beings voice what they carry. The circle answers each one, spoken not in unison: we hear you, Mountain. We hear you, Wild Goose.

Stage two — humans in the centre

After a dozen or so testimonies, reflect that all this suffering seems to come from one adolescent species. Invite five or six to set down their masks and sit back-to-back in the centre, facing outward. From now on they are addressed directly, and they listen only — they do not answer.

Beat the drum after a while and rotate, so that everybody takes a turn in the middle. Sitting there being addressed, with no way to defend yourself or explain your reasoning or point out that you do recycle, is where a great deal of the work of this ritual quietly happens.

Stage three — the gifts

When the humans have been called to account, name the shift out loud. They are frightened, overwhelmed by what they have set in motion. Panic and giving up serve nothing, and our life is in their hands.

| *“If they can wake up to their place in the web of life, they will change their ways. What strengths and gifts can each of us give them to help them now?”*

Each being offers, and each human in the centre receives. The mountain's deep peace to rest and dream in. The condor's far-seeing eye, to look past the day's busyness. The wildflower's fragrance, calling you back to beauty. Humans sometimes break their silence here to say only: thank you.

Ending

Councils end differently — in reflective silence, in embracing and sounding together, or bursting into drumming and wild calls. However it goes, do not skip the formal release.

Each person thanks the life-form they spoke for, then lets that identity go. Hands and foreheads to the ground, returning the energy that moved through them to the earth, for the healing of all beings.

Masks can be burned reverently, composted, or carried home to sit on a shelf for a while. Seed and Macy sometimes close with an inversion that is worth offering out loud, because it tends to follow people down the road afterwards: keep the being as your true identity, and put your own human face back on as the mask you wear to re-enter the world.

The one-hour version

When time is short, drop the masks and the practice sessions. You keep the essential thing: the chance to step outside your human identity and speak for another species.

People cluster in fours. Eyes closed, they let themselves be chosen as above. Then each takes about ten minutes, leaning in, heads together, eyes half-closed, covering three parts you name beforehand:

- What it is like to be this life-form — your powers, your perspective, the relationships that nourish you and that you nourish.
- The disruptions and difficulties you face now.
- Since humans cause these and only they can correct them, what strengths can you offer to help them change?

Close by pointing out something easy to miss: the gifts each life-form offered are already present in the people who imagined them. They could not have occurred to us otherwise.

Variations that work

- Stick-on labels with a drawn symbol instead of masks, when materials are short.
- Clay figures made in five minutes, then speaking as the being around the circle.
- Large groups split into delegations, each taking one of the three stages, with speakers walking the circle so everyone can hear.
- Online: invite people to be called by a being in advance, arrive with cameras off and muted for the invocation, then rename themselves as the being and turn cameras on.

Watch for

Do not run this cold. It belongs downstream of grief work — a song, Open Sentences, a Truth Mandala, something that has already opened the ground. Without that the group has nowhere to speak from, and what you get is costume rather than Council.

Take part yourself, in character, mask and all. A guide standing outside the circle with a clipboard signals, without meaning to, that this is a thing to be observed rather than entered — and the group will follow that signal every time, however warmly you invite them not to.

Resist filling the silences, which run long in this practice. I have learned to notice that the urge to say something into a gap is almost always my own discomfort rather than the group's need, and that if I sit on my hands for another twenty seconds somebody else nearly always speaks, and says something better than I would have.

If the room stays polite, it has not really started, and no amount of encouragement from the edge will shift that — nobody in the history of the world has been talked into playfulness. The only lever you have is your own willingness to be sillier than everyone else for slightly longer than is comfortable.

And do not rush the gifts. Groups often want to finish on the accusation, because accusation carries more heat and arrives more readily — but the gifts are the point of the whole thing, and they take their own time to come. Leave more room than you think you need.

Reflection questions

- Who chose you, and what surprised you about it?
- What was it like to sit in the centre and only listen?
- What gift did you offer — and where in your own life does that strength already live?

One last thing

The first time I ran a Council I spent most of it worrying whether it was working, which is of course the surest way not to notice that it is. What convinced me in the end was not the testimonies, striking as they were, but the gifts — watching people offer a mountain's steadiness or a condor's long sight to a huddle of humans sitting back to back on the floor, and realising that every one of those gifts had come out of somebody in that room. They were never the being's to give. They were ours all along, and we had simply needed a mask and an hour to find them.

So: which being do you think might come for you? And what would it be like to let it?