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Lookout Point

Teaching About Religion

John Hergesheimer

Religion is one of the great binding forces in any society. Even in a predominantly secular society such as ours, vital common values have been shaped—and continue to be shaped—by religions.

This is not to say that the only roles of religion in human history have been benevolent. Religion has been co-opted into the support systems for despotic regimes or unjust social structures, some of which have lasted for centuries. For example, in this country, slave owners sought justification for the institution of slavery by quoting the Bible. Religion has also been used as the banner for ethnic hostilities and even genocide—in spite of the fact that central to all of the world's great religions is a recognition of human kinship and a rejection of hatred and violence. We should not minimize the mischief done and the tragedies caused by the distortions and exploitation of religious teachings and belief. Fundamentalist zealots thrive on the hatreds they can engender towards other groups, both outside and inside their own religion, by their narrow and distorted view of their own faith.

And yet, religion has frequently been a liberating force in human society, as can be seen in the history of our own nation. In the first half of the nineteenth century, religious conviction and philosophy gave rise to the Abolition movement that led to the end of slavery. Personal spirituality and organized religion played a similar role in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. At countless points in history, religious institutions and religious persons have been the catalysts of political reform, economic and social justice, the broadening of knowledge, human compassion, and cultural creativity. Not infrequently, changes advocated by religious groups have eventually been adopted by the larger secular society. Sometimes these changes

have, in turn, reformed the religious institutions and beliefs which gave them birth. For example, some people who actively supported the civil rights movement in the 1960s found that the societal desegregation they were helping to bring about made it necessary to recognize and deal with the segregation built into their own denominations or congregations.

The beliefs and practices of non-religious people, the agnostic and the atheist, must be respected in our society. One of the corollaries of freedom of religion is the freedom not to practice a religion. But those who insist that our schools ignore the place of religion in history and in culture, or who limit the place of religion to a grim catalog of religious intolerance, are perhaps guilty of a “secular fundamentalism” that may distort reality as much as some religious fundamentalists do. It is entirely proper that our governmental institutions—including our public schools—be secular, but “secular” means “non-religious,” not “anti-religious.” Good social studies teaching does not whitewash the historical role of religion, but neither does it depict religion in an exclusively negative light or omit it entirely from the lesson. 📖

John Hergesheimer is editor of Sunburst, the newsletter of the California Council for the Social Studies. A longer version of this essay appeared in the issue of October 2001.

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DANCING THE CIRCLE: AN INTRODUCTION TO POWWOWS

Karen D. Harvey

There is no single word that describes the powwow. Powwow is Indian. Although nowadays there is an emphasis on contest dancing, it is still the same as when I grew up. The powwow is a place of healing, praying, dancing, and singing. A place to join others in pride and respect.... When you're feeling sad, come to a powwow and you'll be happy again. There will be a feeling you didn't have when you first came there.

—Tony Brown, in *Powwow Country*.¹

The term powwow, Algonquin in origin, meant a person of power, perhaps a “medicine man,” or a gathering for healing ceremonies.² (The Algonquin family of American Indian languages were spoken from Labrador to Carolina and westward to the Great Plains). Powwow has now come to mean an organized gathering of tribal people where friendships are renewed and traditional activities such as drumming, singing, dancing, and feasting are celebrated. Powwows are held in communities all over North America, usually during the summer. They may be small or large, last for a few hours or a few days, be held indoors and outdoors, on reservations, campgrounds, athletic fields, and in school gymnasiums. There are contest (competitive) powwows and traditional (non-competitive) powwows. They may be organized by individual families, tribal councils or other tribal organizations, community groups, museums, and Native student groups. One can see regional and tribal dif-

ferences in powwow dance, regalia, food, and ceremony in powwows held in different parts of the continent. Powwows usually have a commercial side, with trade in arts and crafts and concessions of all sorts.

The following lesson (pages 6-9), “Everything the Indian Does Is In a Circle,” is a version of one of eleven lessons in a unit of study about powwows and American Indian culture that I helped develop for middle school students in the Denver Public Schools.³ (This lesson, taught early in the unit, is intended to “set the stage;” it is not a comprehensive presentation about powwows.) The larger unit was designed to develop students’ understanding of powwows as more than dance contests, elaborate regalia, or the sale of fry bread—they are a contemporary symbol of Indian philosophy and a reinforcement of Indian culture, tribal cohesion, and individual identity. The unit provides a cultural context for the music, dance, and ceremony of the powwow, so that learning about (and possibly attending) a powwow can be a meaningful, as well as exuberant, experience for students.

General Guidelines

While powwows can be spectacular, a spectator with little knowledge of American Indian traditions would miss much of the





Gathering of Nations

meaning of the regalia, ceremony, music, and dance. Before attempting to teach the lesson, teachers should complete some basic reading, talk with American Indian people, and if possible, attend a powwow. An uninformed teacher could do more harm than good (without intending to) by perpetuating cultural or historical inaccuracies or stereotypes instead of presenting accurate content.

Government policies such as forced attendance at boarding schools, forced removal and land takeover, and relocation from reservations to urban areas, have had long-term effects on many Indian people. Some missionary efforts have been corrosive of American Indian culture and society. Also, intertribal and inter-racial marriages have made genealogy and the question “who is a Native American” complex. For these reasons, if there are Indian students in classes that are studying the powwow, teachers are cautioned as follows:

- ▶ Do not attempt to identify students as American Indian based upon their names or physical features (factors such as intermarriage and assimilation have made it impossible to accurately identify American Indians by their physical features or their names);
- ▶ Do not assume that students wish to be publicly identified as Indian (many Indian people do not like to be singled-out, and some, for a variety of reasons, do not identify with their Indian heritage, hold traditional values, or practice traditional ways);
- ▶ Do not expect Indian children to be familiar with and participate in their tribal histories and cultural traditions (there are many Indian children, particularly in urban areas, who are not familiar with their own history and traditions and many adults are not familiar with the history and traditions of tribes other than their own).

The term American Indian is used throughout our larger unit of study. Although Native American is often used in the literature, increasingly the term American Indian is the preferred term by the people themselves. More precisely, American Indian people identify themselves by their tribe/nation, such as Lakota, Diné, or Cherokee. Many tribes/nations are now returning to their original names, in preference to the names given to them by others, such as European explorers. An Indian nation is a legal entity recognized by the United States that enjoys limited rights of sovereignty.⁴ Because of this unique status, the term nation is often used instead of the word tribe. For example, “Cherokee Nation” is frequently used instead of “Cherokee Tribe.”

A Holistic Perspective

Teachers may see the words religion, philosophy, and art used in books and curricula that refer to American Indians. In practice, however, American Indians often do not make such distinctions. Spirituality, as opposed to organized religion, permeates all of traditional Indian life. Art, dance, and music are a part of personal spirituality, and thus are integral parts of every day life (not just parts of occasional ceremonies) for many tribes. This holistic understanding of these activities gives a spiritual aspect to many powwows, as illustrated by these statements.

For me, it's a spiritual thing. I come to a powwow to be an Indian, to get a sense of myself, a sense of pride and heritage. This is part of Indian spirituality, to help each other and to celebrate with each other. When I come to powwows I gain strength to carry on with the endeavors of my life.⁵

The powwow is a spiritual experience without being a religious one. The powwow helps us to see ourselves. There's self-respect at a powwow, tribal respect, national respect, respect for the powwow life, respect for being Indian. Religion blends into the powwow. Elders pray to open dance sessions. When asked to pray, we have the same feeling in our hearts. We give thanks in our individual way. We say the same prayer only with different words, different languages. One race, one people celebrating ourselves.⁶

The powwow unit of study is linked especially to the following themes of the social studies standards:

● **CULTURE;** ● **TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE;** ● **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY;** and ● **INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS.** For example, standard I poses the questions, "How do belief systems, such as religion or political ideals, influence other parts of the culture? How does the culture change to accommodate different ideas and beliefs?"⁷ Powwows have evolved and grown in size over the last generation so that now they are a major expression of cultural continuity for many tribes. Old elements may have been dropped (in some tribes, the gatherings were preparation for war), and new elements added (judged competitions and craft shows), but the legacy of Indian life has been made stronger by the powwow.

In Every State

Each state has its own history with respect to American Indians. For example, while many tribes lived and hunted in the area now defined by the state of Colorado, only the Ute Nation holds federally recognized reservations (the Southern Ute and the Ute Mountain Reservations). The U.S. government removed other tribes, such as the Cheyenne and Arapaho, to reservations in Montana and Oklahoma in the late 1800s. Today, Indian people from all parts of North America reside in the cities and coun-

tryside of Colorado, not only on reservations. This diversity is represented by the children of dozens of different Indian nations who are currently enrolled in Denver Public Schools. The spectacular annual Denver March Powwow makes it clear that Colorado is in the heart of Indian Country.

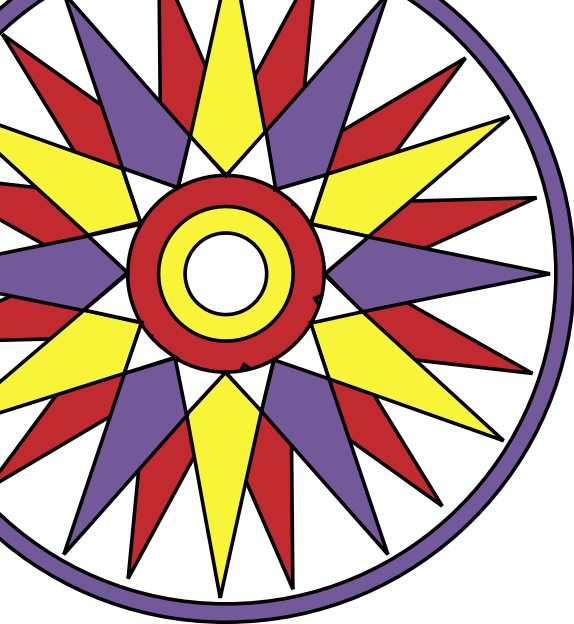
There are American Indian populations, if not reservations, in every state. There might be an annual powwow held closer to your neighborhood than you would think.⁸ Even if there is no powwow close enough to your community for a family day trip or school field trip, there are marvelous videos, many books, and other resources that can make this celebration come to life for your students.



Notes

1. Tony Brown, in Chris Roberts, ed., *Powwow Country* (Helena, MT: American & World Geographic, 1992).
2. Rayna Green, *The British Museum Encyclopedia of Native America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 125.
3. "Powwow: Dancing the Circle" Denver, CO: Denver Public Schools (2000). This unit of study was created by a team of Indian and non-Indians educators and community members in response to new state legislation and at the urging of the Denver American Indian community for positive curriculum about contemporary American Indians. The eleven lessons cover topics such as "Who is an Indian?" "The History and Purpose of the Powwow" and "Powwow Etiquette." For information, contact Neil Deason, coordinator of secondary social studies, Denver Public Schools, Phone: 303-764-3632, E-mail: neil_deason@dpsk12.org.
4. The meaning of tribal sovereignty is complex and continually challenged and changing. Indian nations have the right to establish their own governments, for example, to define their membership and policy for land-use, but such Indian laws must be in accord with federal law, and conflicts sometimes arise over state laws, as with Indian gaming (gambling). See Sharon O'Brien, *American Indian Tribal Governments* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1989).
5. Tony Brown, in C. Roberts, ed., *Powwow Country*.
6. Rachel Scott in Ben Marra, *Powwow: Images Along the Red Road* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).
7. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994), x.
8. A large listing of powwows can be found at the website www.nativeweb.org. Just enter "powwow" in the Search box. Front and back cover images courtesy of www.gatheringofnations.com

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Everything an Indian Does is in a Circle: An Introduction to the Powwow

(Based on a Lesson from “Powwow: Dancing the Circle,” a unit of study of the Denver Public Schools. —Karen D. Harvey)

Summary

The words “Everything an Indian Does is in a Circle,” spoken by Black Elk in the Lakota language in the 1930s, are a statement about American Indian beliefs and way of life. The powwow is a way people who are not American Indians can learn about the importance of the circle in Indian thought and life. This introductory lesson uses the voices of Indian people of the past and present to help students learn of the importance of the circle in Indian thought and how the circle manifests itself in a the powwow, a contemporary celebration of American Indian history and culture. Most importantly, understanding the symbolism of the circle sets the study of the powwow in an appropriate cultural context.

Time

This lesson takes about three 50-minute class periods, four if the lesson extensions are used.

Materials for the Lesson

The readings are from the books *Black Elk Speaks* by J. G. Neihardt; *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* by J. Lame Deer; and *Powwow: Questions and Answers* by the United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck, North Dakota. The book *Lakota Hoop Dancer* by J. Left Hand Bull and S. Haldane is used in the lesson extension. (See Resources list and Handouts for full citations).

An integral part of the powwow unit of study is the one-hour videotape *Into the Circle: An Introduction to the Powwow* from Full Circle Videos, part or all of which can be shown during this lesson.

Student Learning Objectives

After this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Recognize the circle as an important symbol to American Indian people.
2. State two specific concepts or beliefs (like unity and the cycle of life) that the circle represents.
3. Identify parts of the powwow that use and honor the circle.
4. Demonstrate their understanding that the powwow is a way to honor the important concepts or beliefs that the circle symbolizes.

Teaching the Lesson

1. (First class) Tell the class that the circle is an important symbol in American Indian life. Ask students to listen for evidence of this and to take notes as you read aloud pages 194 to 196 of *Black Elk Speaks* (Handout A), which begins, “You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle.”
2. Also read aloud a passage from page 100 of *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*, (Handout B), which begins, “To our way of thinking the Indians’ symbol is the circle, the hoop. Nature wants things to be round.” Because of the beauty and power of the words, these selections are best read aloud, as in the American Indian oral tradition. (Alternative method: Ask students to work in groups of two. Distribute the words of Black Elk’s and Lame Deer to each group. Ask each group to read both selections and try to determine what the circle represents in Indian thought and beliefs.)
3. As a class, discuss what Black Elk’s statement “Everything an Indian does is in a circle” means. Ask for examples of things in Indian life (mentioned in the readings) and in students’ own lives that might be represented by a circle.
4. (Second class) Introduce the idea that the powwow also is a circle and that the circle has great meaning to Indian people. Show the video *Into the Circle* (60 minutes). (Alternatively, show the first two 5-minute segments of the video, “Beginnings” and “Songs and Singers,” and save the rest for

future lessons. Jump to the activities below. Doing this can reduce the length of the lesson to two periods.)

5. (Third class) Finish showing any segments of the video, if time ran out during the last class. Then read the following statement aloud and place it on an overhead transparency, if possible. (It is from Powwow: Questions and Answers.)

The circle is an important symbol to Native American people. The dancers are in the center of a circle, the drums and audience form a circle around them, and the concessions form yet another circle around the gathering. The Powwow brings the circle of the people closer together - closer to their family, friends and their Native American culture.

On the board or on an overhead transparency, draw three concentric circles (which will look like a target). Ask students to copy this image and to label each circle so that it shows the floor plan of a powwow. Read this quote again as they create this diagram. Then move on to the assessment.

Assessment

(Last 40 minutes of the third class) Ask, “Why is the circle an important image in American Indian powwows?” Students can demonstrate what they have learned, either in writing or during a discussion, in response to this question. Students might mention that

1. The powwow honors the circle as a symbol of American Indian culture. There are circles in the floor plan of the powwow; in the drumheads, shields, and the hoops of the dancers; and in many of the designs in the traditional clothing worn by men and women at a powwow.
2. The circle symbolizes American Indian beliefs and way of life — unity, equality, harmony, balance, the cycle of the seasons, and the cycle of life.

Extensions

Once your students have completed the basic lesson above on powwows, they should have some concepts and specific examples in mind that they can use in further discussions and related lessons about American Indian culture. Each of these extension ideas here would require 25 minutes or more of class time.

One idea is to read aloud the chapter “The Dance” from the book *Lakota Hoop Dancer*, which begins,

Kevin Locke’s performance of the hoop dance is far more than a display of beautiful regalia. And it is more than a demonstration of skill. Through his dance, Kevin conveys a message of hope for the future. He proclaims the continuity of the cycle of life. He tells a story of springtime. He

captures a timelessness, bridging past and present, present and future. His dance praises the physical world of the here and now, but also the unseen world around us. It draws a circle that includes everybody. It celebrates the nobility of the human spirit.

Show the pictures from this chapter. Ask students, “How does dancer Kevin Locke represent social ideals (like people helping each other) with wooden hoops?” The text gives several examples. Then see if students can recall seeing the symbol of interlocking loops used in other contexts (for example, in the logo of the Olympics).

Another option is to ask students, in a discussion or in writing, to express their opinions about this passage from *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions* (page 101):

The white man’s symbol is the square. Square is his house, his office building with walls that separate people from one another. Square is the door which keeps strangers out, the dollar bill, the jail. Square are the white man’s gadgets—boxes, boxes, boxes and more boxes—TV sets, radios, washing machines, computers, cars. These all have corners and sharp edges—points in time, white man’s time, with appointments, time clocks and rush hours—that’s what the corners mean to me. You become a prisoner inside all these boxes.

There is not a right or wrong way to respond to this statement. It is an interesting perspective on modern society and technology. The point is to invite students to compare different ways of life and looking at the world, and to think of the power of a simple thing, like a square or a circle, and how it can be used as a tool for exploring our social environment.

Resources for Teaching about Powwows

Powwow Books for Students

These books cover the wide-range of reading abilities that are found in middle school classrooms. In Denver, we provide the two books by Chris Roberts to our teachers as background.

Ancona, George. *Powwow*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993.

Braine, Susan. *Drumbeat...Heartbeat: A Celebration of the Powwow*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner, 1995.

Crum, Robert. *Eagle Drum: On the Powwow Trail with a Young Grass Dancer*. New York: Four Winds, 1994.

Greene, Jacqueline Dembar. *Powwow: A Good Day to Dance*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1998.

Horse Capture, George. *Powwow*. Cody, WY: Buffalo Bill Historical Center, 1989.

King, Sandra. *Shannon: An Ojibway Dancer*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner, 1993.

Left Hand Bull, Jacqueline, and Suzanne Haldane. *Lakota Hoop Dancer*. New York: Dutton, 1999.

Mitchell, Barbara. *Red Bird*. New York, NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1996.

Marra, Ben. *Powwow: Images Along the Red Road*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

Momaday, N. Scott. *In the Presence of the Sun*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.

Peters, Russell. *Regalia: American Indian Dress and Dance*. Littleton, MA: Sundance, 1994.

Raczek, Linda Theresa. *Rainy's Powwow*. Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon/Northland, 1999.

Rendon, Marcie. *R. Powwow Summer: A Family Celebrates the Circle of Life*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner, 1996.

Roberts, Chris. *Powwow Country*. Helena, MT: American & World Geographic, 1992.

———. *People of the Circle*. Missoula, MT: Meadowlark, 1998.

Smith, Cynthia L. *Jingle Dancer*. New York: Morrow, 2000.

United Tribes Technical College. *Powwow: Questions and Answers*. Bismarck, ND: UTTC, 1993.

Music/Dance Books

The last three books are primarily for teachers, but are accessible to middle school students with grade-level reading skills.

Bierhorst, John. *A Cry From the Earth*. Santa Fe, NM: Ancient City, 1992.

Burton, Bryan. *Moving Within the Circle*. Danbury, CT: World Music Press, 1993.

Heth, Charlotte. ed. *Native American Dance*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum, National Museum of the American Indian/Smithsonian, 1993.

Spotted Eagle, Douglas. *Voices of Native America: Native American Instruments and Music*. Liberty, UT: Eagle's View Publishing, 1997.

Videos

The first video listed provides a most complete explanation of the powwow and is an integral part of the unit of study. Examples shown in the video are from Oklahoma powwows.

Into the Circle: An Introduction to the Powwow. Tulsa, OK: Full Circle Videos, 1992. Phone: 800-940-8849. Website: www.fullcir.com. 1 hr, \$19.95.

How to Dance Native American Style: Beginning Steps. Tulsa, OK: Full Circle Videos. 30 min., \$19.95

Native American Men's & Women's Dance Styles: Vol. 1 & 2. Tulsa, OK: Full Circle Videos. 1 hr. \$19.95 each volume.

Audio-Cassettes

Listening to a recording is a valuable experience that is not precluded by seeing a videotape. These two audiotapes are used in other lessons in the powwow curriculum.

Black Lodge Singers: Enter the Circle Phoenix, AZ: Canyon Records (1998). Phone: 800-268-1141. Website: www.canyonrecords.com. 40 min, \$15.98 CD, \$9.98 tape.

Black Lodge Singers: Kids' Pow-wow Songs. Phoenix, AZ: Canyon Records (1996). 38 min.

Websites

A court order has restricted Internet access to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (at the U.S. Department of the Interior), so many government websites are, at present, of little use when searching for current information about Native Americans. But there are many other useful sites hosted by organizations and universities.

NativeWeb (www.nativeweb.org) provides searches that are quite fruitful. For example, entering the word "powwow" in the search box provides links to powwows held in locations across the United States. Start here to find other informative websites.

Gathering of Nations (www.gatheringofnations.com) sponsors the largest powwow in North America annually, and their website includes teaching ideas and a colorful collection of images.

Curricula and Materials for Teachers

These publications contain lesson plans, handouts, and resource lists.

Harvey, Karen D., Lisa D. Harjo, and Jane K. Jackson. *Teaching About Native Americans*, NCSS Bull. 84, second ed. (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1997). Phone: 800-683-0812.

Hirschfelder, Arlene and Yvonne Beamer. *Native Americans Today: Resources and Activities for Educators, Grades 4-8*. Englewood, CO: Teach Ideas Press, 2000. Phone 800-237-6124. Website: www.lu.com/tip.

Handout A

WORDS OF BLACK ELK

You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to use from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion.

Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the Earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children.

John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1932, 1959, 1972), 194-196. Copyright © 1961 by the John G. Neihardt Trust. Reprinted with the permission of the University of Nebraska Press.

Handout B

WORDS OF LAME DEER

To our way of thinking the Indians' symbol is the circle, the hoop. Nature wants things to be round. The bodies of human beings and animals have no corners. With us the circle stands for the togetherness of people who sit with one another around the campfire, relatives and friends united in peace while the pipe passes from hand to hand. The camp in which every tipi had its place was also a ring. The tipi was a ring in which people sat in a circle and all the families in the village were in turn circles within a larger circle, part of the larger hoop which was the seven campfires of the Sioux, representing one nation. The nation was only a part of the universe, in itself circular and made of the earth, which is round, of the sun, which is round, of the stars, which are round. The moon, the horizon, the rainbow—circles within circles within circles, with no beginning and no end.

To us this is beautiful and fitting, symbol and reality at the same time, expressing the harmony of life and nature. Our circle is timeless, flowing; it is new life emerging from death—life winning out over death... Join our circle. That is good.

John Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 100-101. Reprinted with the permission of Simon & Schuster. Copyright ©1972 by John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes.



Gathering of Nations



Gathering of Nations

World Religions and

Sofia Udner

As is the case in many states, Arizona lacks adequate funds for the teaching of social studies in the middle school, so teachers with specialties in other fields of study are often called upon. Last fall, our principal informed several of us seventh grade teachers that we would be teaching the social studies curriculum. “I teach seventh grade math,” I thought to myself, “How am I going to be able to teach seventh grade social studies?” Dividing up the sections was easy – until we came to the taboo section: world religions. After some grueling debate, the team decided that I was the most qualified candidate to teach this section, only because I have a very diverse religious and cultural background. (I was born in Nairobi, Kenya, to a Muslim Pakistani father and a Christian Finnish mother.) I was apprehensive because the topic of religion is very controversial. Indeed, I was surprised that it was in the district’s curriculum at all. I imagined parents calling up to ask questions like, “Why are you teaching my child religion?”

Preparation

The Scottsdale District’s curriculum states that students will compare and contrast “the world’s five great religions”: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Students are to examine the origins, founders, main beliefs, and customs of each religion. Religious conflicts, as well as current events issues, are to be explored. This seemed a tall order to fill. I started reading materials for the course, but I also considered who I would be teaching.



AP Photo/Nick Ut

Members of the Valley Hindu Temple celebrate the Hindu New Year 2058 (on November 16, 2001) in the Northridge section of Los Angeles. The event, also known as the festival of lights, features prayers of peace.

My class consisted of twenty-nine students of varying ethnic and national background, including seventeen Americans of Northern European and one of East Indian background, one Native American, eight Hispanics, one Iraqi, and one Chinese. The class met for forty-five minutes each day. A preservice teacher from Ottawa College joined the adventure.

At the outset, I decided that, throughout the year, I would gather data about what sense my students were making of the curriculum: I would write in a journal (my preservice teacher also kept a journal), interview students, and analyze their work. For example, I coded the data according to four categories: (1) Lacking Previous Knowledge; (2) New Ways of Thinking; (3) Making Connections; and (4) Openness/Awareness. At the conclusion of the course, I reviewed these data to see what changes had occurred in my students. In this article, I would like to describe some of the process of learning that went on, and to highlight some of the interesting moments for the students, and for the teachers, as we learned together about world religions.

The Adventure Begins

The first thing I had to do was find out where my students were coming from. What did they already know (or think they knew) about the topic? What background did they have? I gave my students a questionnaire, asking them to describe each of the world’s five great religions. The results of the survey did not surprise me. Most students knew a lot about the current practice of Christianity. Many gave details like, “I know a lot because it is my religion and I go to church every Sunday.” As for Judaism, their statements were less precise: “They have a fun game called dreidel” and “They are originally from Israel.” When it came to Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam, most students simply responded, “I don’t know anything about this.” However, one student had an extensive amount of insight about Hinduism and another about Islam; each came from a family that practiced that religion. As I had expected, students who practice a particular religion had some previous knowledge of its main aspects, but if a religion was not their own, they did not seem to have much awareness of it.

Personal Tolerance

Sudden Tragedy

Students had taken notes from hearing lectures, watching videos, and viewing things that I brought to class, like some Hindu holy books, saris, and pictures of a Hindu wedding. They considered the course material to be important in the lives of “other people,” but not really relevant to their own lives. There wasn’t much discussion during class. Up until September 11, 2001, we had spent six weeks discussing the main ideas of Hinduism and Buddhism. The terrorist attacks that occurred on that date gave a strange and solemn backdrop to the whole course.

I tried to present the events of that day from an objective point of view, but my students heard the media putting the blame for the actions on “fundamentalist Muslims.” This was very confusing for my students, as they had no basis on which to separate “fundamentalist Muslims” from “Muslims in general.” The confusion became a springboard to serious inquiry about Islam and the complex questions that arose from the tragedy. Islam was our next religion to study.

My classroom became a forum where students could talk about the things they heard and saw on television and what they were feeling. Within three weeks, my students could articulate the difference between the teachings of Islam and the political use of religion in the rhetoric of Osama bin Laden, the militant Saudi exile who was said to be behind the attacks. We also broadened the focus of our study so that we investigated how racism and stereotypes were affecting our own community. We read in the newspaper how some people (in various places in the United States including, unfortunately, our own community) were harassed and abused because of their ethnic or religious background.

Toward Understanding

The social studies curriculum helped my students develop new ways of thinking, as exemplified by the following quotes, which are from students’ statements made in class, in interviews with me or the preservice teacher, or in students’ journals:

- ▶ At first I thought that every Muslim hated the United States and now I know better.
- ▶ After what happened on 9-11, I was afraid of Muslim people but now I know that they are a peaceful people.

- ▶ I didn’t understand why they would do that. I thought we were the victims and they [Muslims] were all the bad guys but I learned that it’s not like that. What’s that word we learned? (Teacher): Fundamentalists? Yeah! They [fundamentalist Muslims] are not like most Muslims. Muslims are just like everyone else.

- ▶ The Americans that are Muslims, who look different, are mistreated now. I feel bad for all those people. I feel mad when people judge others badly just

based on their religion.

- ▶ I don’t agree with racism because it’s what’s on the inside that counts.

Initially, a couple of students expressed a general fear of Muslim people. We discussed the few incidents, presented in the news, of Muslim people being killed and mosques being vandalized. There were even incidents where people were attacked because they were wearing turbans, whether they were Muslim or not. Fear and hatred were probably present in the people responsible for these crimes.



AP Photo/Eyal Warshavsky

Jewish man blows the Shofar, a traditional Jewish ritual instrument during a prayer meeting at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

An Incident

While I did not hear any of my students make angry or prejudicial statements, we got an unwelcome reminder that racist attitudes were present in our community. One student, whose parents had immigrated from Iraq (Fatima, I'll call her), found a paper in her backpack, placed there during the bus ride home by an unknown student, several days after 9-11. It simply stated, "You are all killers!" Fatima confided the incident to me, her world religions teacher. I alerted the principal about the incident, but we had no luck finding the perpetrator. (This event was kept confidential between the student and adult staff.)

This incident got me thinking. I decided that my class was an opportunity for me to help others see Fatima for who she really was. I felt that the more friends she made, the less of a target she'd be. So I invited Fatima to teach a portion of the lesson about Islam, and she agreed. She brought in her Koran, prayer beads, prayer mat, and some Iraqi food. She described her own experience of Islam, the holidays, rules for living, and forms of worship. She talked about Iraq and her travels to the Middle East.

The students loved her presentation of writing the Arabic alphabet. After class, students asked her, "Can you write my name in Arabic?" She said, "Of course." Suddenly, her homework assignment, given by the students, was to write all of their names in Arabic. When she passed them out, students attempted to write their names in Arabic. They carried those pieces of paper to their other classes and shared them with their peers. Suddenly, Fatima had made some new friends and seemed less anxious.

Would Fatima have come to me if we weren't studying world religions? I believe that my class, and the way I was teaching about

world religions, created a safe place for Fatima. It opened a forum for her to present her religion and culture from her point of view, which helped dispel stereotypes, and gave all of my students a more accurate picture of their world.

Making Connections

A few days after these events, and to the astonishment of his classmates, a boy suddenly started talking about his Hindu background. He shared experiences and events from his own religion and culture of origin. He brought items to class for an improvised show and tell. He was visibly proud, both of these belongings and of his background. His peers showered him with questions and comments.

After these student presentations, there was a mood in the class that I guess I'll describe as a feeling of pride. The awareness of real diversity in our midst somehow brought home the importance of what we were doing and who we were. Our study was not just an academic exercise.

Students began noticing things in their own community that related to different religions and different cultures. They began asking questions and making comments about these observations in class and in their journals.

- ▶ (In class discussion.) One student noticed a new Hindu temple being built as he rode with his mother down a suburban street. I asked him how he knew it was Hindu, and he said, "Oh, because it had a big sign that said it, and I remembered the Hindu symbol, Aum. It was on [the sign] too."
- ▶ Another student had seen the crescent moon in the sky. He asked me if that meant that Ramadan had started. Fatima said, "Yes, we started fasting." The students had tons of questions for her. For example, "What's it like not to eat at lunch?" and "Aren't you hungry?"
- ▶ (From a journal.) "I saw a lady at Minitown wearing a sari trimmed with gold. So I said to her after the skirts that she had a beautiful sari on and she said, Well thank you, how did you know it was a sari? I said, I learned it by my social studies teacher Ms. Udner."

Joyful Discovery

Increasingly, students made connections between what they had learned in class and what they were seeing in their own community and learning about from the TV news and newspapers. Admittedly, we did not have time for an in-depth



Muslim believers pray at Mecca, capital of the Hejaz in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the prophet Mohammed and the holiest site of Islam. At its center is the great Mosque enclosing the Kaaba, a sanctuary made of stone.

study of any one religion or culture. Most of my students gained only a basic knowledge about most of the topics we discussed during the semester. Their statements were occasionally juvenile, but they indicated that the students “caught” at least some of the specifics taught in class. Just as important, I believe that there was a sense of joyful discovery among my students. They felt proud that they had a “real Hindu” and a “real Muslim” in their class. Toward the end of the class, they were beginning to display increasing openness and awareness of the world around them, as described in their journals:

- ▶ I will have more respect now that I understand more.
- ▶ My world view has changed, I've seen different parts of the world that I might never see in real life and I found out that the world is much bigger than I thought.
- ▶ I've learned not to pre-judge someone.
- ▶ If people were making fun of them [people from a different culture], I would stick up for them because I understand things more about others.
- ▶ Before I learned of all these things [religions] I just thought there was [only] two different religions... Thanks for teaching me [otherwise]!

This last statement was an honest admission of the student's previous misconception: that there were only two religions in the world. But there are five major world religions, each with a treasury of history, customs, and teachings. What an amazing discovery for this student to have made about his world.

Teachers and Learning

While I empower my students with cultural and religious tolerance, it seems to me that many teachers are not ready to embrace such an approach. I have experienced racism and stereotyping aimed at me by colleagues. These teachers are the very ones who will help mold our students into the adult citizens of the future. If teachers are against an open-minded approach to the teaching of other cultures and religions, then what will happen to the seeds of tolerance and understanding that teachers like myself have planted?

Parents seemed to be very supportive regarding the curriculum that I was teaching. One parent even stated that “I am glad that my child is learning about different religions, because I never did.”

The reflections of my preservice teacher point to the broader perspective, “Increased knowledge also tends to increase tolerance and respect for almost all areas of the human experience.” Many

teachers and students have a limited exposure to cultures other than their own, a situation that has been called “ethnic encapsulation.”¹ I feel that there is a need for teachers, as well as youth, to enjoy learning about other cultures and religions. Sometimes there is a lot we can learn right in our own communities, even from our own students.² If we could open ourselves to learning about these interesting differences, it might make our world a friendlier place to live.³ 🌐

Notes

1. James A. Banks, *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1988).
2. For other articles related to ethnic and religious tolerance in America since September-11, see the series, “Dealing with Tragedy in the Classroom: What NCSS Members are Doing,” which appears occasionally in issues of the NCSS newsletter *The Social Studies Professional* (Nov/Dec, 2001; Mar/Apr 2002; May/June 2002; and). See also the October and November/December 2001 issues of *Social Education* and subsequent letters to the editor. Many of these items are available online at www.socialstudies.org.
3. I would like to thank professor Carl Alzen, in the Department of World Religions at Central Arizona College, and Desiree Custodio of Supai Middle School, my preservice teacher.

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Early Tolerance

In 1568, in the tiny country of Transylvania, King John Sigismund proclaimed an edict of religious tolerance. After hosting an open forum that lasted ten days—in which clerics from the different religions debated one another—Sigismund decided that there would be no official state religion in Transylvania (not Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Unitarian). Rather, citizens could choose where and how they wished to worship and could not harass anyone else for his or her spiritual practice. This law of religious freedom was unheard of in Europe at the time, coming more than 200 years before such laws were established in England. Although Sigismund's edict was ignored by Austro-Hungarian rulers, the tradition of religious tolerance is upheld by many citizens and churches in Romania to this day.

My Name is Osama

A short story by **Sharifa Alkhateeb** and **Steven S. Lapham**

I can't reach the top of the little apple tree any more. Me and Rayna planted it when it was just a green stick. Rayna is my grandmother. I was five years old then. I am twelve now. In the fall, these flower buds will be apples, but I won't be here to pick them.

I give old man Monsoor fifteen dinars for bread for my whole family, for our goodbye dinner. All of my cousins will be there, fifteen of them. That will be fun. And sad. I eat a flat little loaf on the way home. Nobody will care. It smells great and the birds are singing.

Walking home I stop at our best swimming spot. Our place: Qais and me. Mother says the Euphrates River is not clean, but we don't care. We strip down to our boxer shorts and jump in on hot, hot days. We sit on the rocks and make up stories about our namesakes who lived a thousand years ago. Osama was a leader of youth. He was kind and strong. My great grandfather was also named Osama. Qais, the famous one, read poetry late into the night to his beloved, Layla. The Qais I know is a poet too. He imagines



(AP Photo/Paul Warner).

Nada Hammoud, ten, of Dearborn, Michigan, (right) holds a candle as Ahmad Kawsan, nine, also of Dearborn, who arrived straight from football practice, looks on during a candlelight ceremony for victims of the 9-11 terrorist attacks, held at the Islamic Institute of Knowledge in Dearborn on September 12, 2001.

the two girls we will someday marry, and both of them are beautiful.

I am glad Rayna is still asleep this morning at our house and cannot see me listening to the water. Smelling the bread. Touching apple blossoms. She always says, "Poets die poor. Be strong like your namesake!"

It was only two weeks ago. Father has just finished building the new house and we have just moved in. I guess it stood out or something because he did not use old bricks. It is three AM and the soldiers tell my father to put up on the wall right now this slick poster of Saddam Hussein. My father does it. They search through everything in our home, messing it up with their sticks. They take the brass bowl with Mother's earrings in it. Then they leave. Father says, "Go back to bed." He has a dark bruise on his cheek.

Two weeks after the soldiers came to our house we are in Algeria. We said goodbye to our family, our friends, my school. To old man Monsoor the baker. We live in Algeria for half a year, then in France, staying in these tiny apartments. I practice my English. I'm thirteen years old and I'm very excited when our jet circles over New York City, in America, land of the free and home of the brave.

I want to hang up the photos in frames of my cousins and friends in Iraq on the wall but my father says, "No nails. Is not your wall. Is your Uncle wall." I share Mohammed's room. Mohammed is my six-year-old cousin. Father works at night in a big restaurant. We have breakfast together, and he practices his English which is not as good as Mother's. Mother works days at the drug store. "Maybe we can have an apartment of our own next year," says Mother.

Todd says, "Your mom wears a bag on her head." He doesn't know my mother has a Ph.D. in pharmacology. She taught my pediatrician at Baghdad University. Todd says, "Your father forces your mother to wear the bag on her head. Your father must be a bully." My mother wears a hijab because she likes to. But I don't say anything to Todd. He bugs me and says bad words. I ignore him. But then after September eleventh he gets really mean and it starts to make me really mad. What he says is this: "Osa-ma! Osa-ma! Osa-ma!"

The hallway is crowded before lunch and Todd is with two

other boys. "Hey. Osama Yo Mama," he says, "Is that dynamite under your shirt? Your mother wears a hood because she is a terrorist. Your mother is a terrorist." Something breaks in me and I turn around and push Todd hard and he falls against the locker and sits on the floor and a thin line of blood is on his upper lip. I look for the other two boys to come at me with their fists but they just stand and stare. At me. The hallway has stopped moving and everybody nearby is quiet.



Mr. Allen looks at me hard from across his desk. He is quiet for a time and then says, "Fights are not tolerated in this school. The consequence of fighting on school property is suspension. Several students have said that Todd did not even touch you." He pauses. "Do you want to tell me what happened today?"

Suspension. I wonder how my parents will punish me for putting this shame on the family. My father's family, my uncle's family. My cousins in Iraq will hear of this. Osama goes to America, gets into trouble. Shame on the family name.

The door of the principal's office opens a bit and Mr. Bagley, the hall monitor, sticks his head through. I stand up out of respect. It is a habit. "Please sit down," says Mr. Allen. "No weapons," says Mr. Bagley. Oh! They checked my locker for weapons!

The door closes. I can't be silent any more. I shout, "Todd says Osa-ma! Osa-ma! He calls me greaseball! He says my mother is a terrorist. It is not a rag, it is not a bag, it is called a hijab! My

mother wears a hijab!"

Mr. Allen looks at me for a long time. Then his chair turns and he looks out the window. The window is open. It is quiet because everybody is in class. The ropes on the flag pole go slap, slap, slap. Sounds like a ship.

Mr. Allen turns back. He says, "Osama, I must suspend you for two weeks. But I will talk to Todd and his parents and the other two boys and their parents." He reaches across the desk and touches with two fingers this small glass soccer ball.

"It must be tough having a first name like Osama. With everything that's been happening in the news, I mean. Osama, my grandfather's last name was not Allen. It was Alfirevich. He changed it to Allen to make it sound more English. More American. But sometimes I think about changing it back." Mr. Allen smiles, "Just to honor my grandfather."

The door opens. The secretary says, "His father is here." I stand up. My cheeks are wet but I am not crying any more. 📺

Sharifa Alkhateeb is director of the Peaceful Families Project, which is funded in part by the U.S. Department of Justice. Part of her work is to provide training to police academies to help law officers understand and interface with immigrants and other Americans who are Muslim. Steven S. Lapham is editor of Middle Level Learning.

Teen Lingo, Post 9-11

"Hey, terrorist!" Sometimes the same word said by a friend as a joke feels very different when coming from a stranger, or someone you barely know.

American teens who call each other "Osama" as a nick name are probably not intending to trivialize terrorism, but are trying to take away some of the horror of recent events. Arab American students who occasionally use such nicknames may also be trying to dampen some of the sting of prejudice aimed at them in the form of these same words.

Underneath the adolescent bravado, the boast that these words can't hurt you, there is "really a tremendous fear that everything can hurt you," says Alan Lipman, executive director of the Center at Georgetown University for the Study of Violence. The center is performing research on how young people are accommodating to the aftermath of 9-11. Rough jokes can help people survive a difficult situation. This was a theme in the popular TV show M.A.S.H. Part of the message of such humor is that bad times will not last forever.

Source: Emily Wax, "In Times of Terror, Teens Talk the Talk, The Washington Post (March 19, 2002): A1.

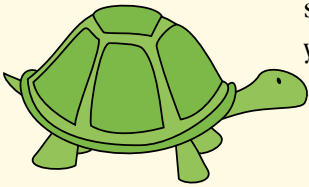
Classroom Discussion Questions

1. What did Osama enjoy about his country of origin, Iraq?
2. Why do you think Osama's family left Iraq?
3. What were some of the difficulties facing Osama's family members as new immigrants to America?
4. Why did Todd's verbal bullying increase after September 11, 2001?
5. Why do you think the principal, Mr. Allen, told Osama about his own grandfather?

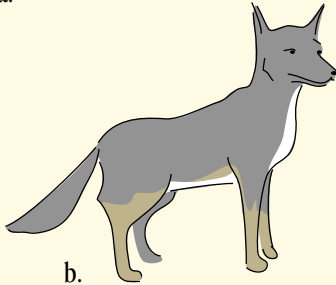
Powerful Creatures: Native American Animal Myths

Steven S. Lapham

Animals play important roles in the stories and teachings of different Native American tribes. Mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, and insects personify aspects of the human spirit as well as reveal truths about the balance of forces in the natural universe. Test your knowledge of native fauna. Match each myth with one of the animals shown.



a.

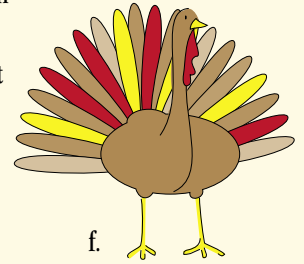


b.



Gathering of Nations

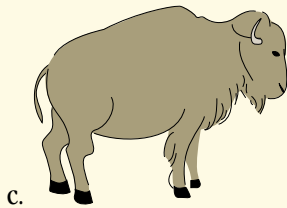
g.



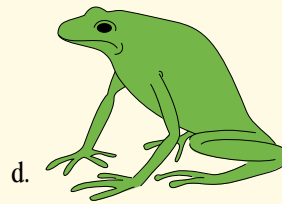
f.



e.



c.



d.

1. In a Seneca creation myth (common to many tribes but told differently in each), this animal packed mud from the bottom of the endless sea on her back to cushion the fall of Star Woman, who was banished from the sky. The back of this animal became the curved and varied surface of the Earth, upon which all land animals live.
2. This noble bird carried grains in her feathers during the great flood that covered all the Earth. When the water receded, the people took these seeds and planted food crops, thus avoiding starvation. (Hint: Benjamin Franklin thought this animal should be our national bird.)
3. This animal is a great trickster, a jokester, and a poacher of game. He is also joyful and creative. Back when the Frog People kept all the water in the world to themselves, he traded them a glittery bit of bone for a drink. With his head and front feet below the surface of the water, he quickly dug a hole, weakening the mud dam that held the reservoir back. When the dam broke, rivers ran free, and all the other creatures in the world could have a drink too.
4. This animal was above all else a teacher. Every part of this animal had a gift to give, a lesson to teach human beings, but its innermost secrets were revealed only to “medicine men.” From its migrations and seasonal habits came the names of the months in the languages of the tribes of the Great Plains.

Sources: Gerald Hausman, *Turtle Island Alphabet: A Lexicon of Native American Symbols and Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, eds., *American Indian Myths and Legends* (New York: Pantheon, 1984). The latter book is for adults. Answers are below.

Answers: 1. a, Turtle; 2. f, Turkey; 3. b, Coyote; 4. c, Buffalo