

## Totems

**Anthony Weston<sup>1</sup>**

I teach a variety of courses at Elon University, but in almost every class I find a way to ask my students to choose totems: animals, or places, or forces of nature, with which they identify and whose power and magic in some way they feel they share. Many pick specific animals: Cat or Dog, Dragonfly, Elephant, Stringray, Deer. A runner may be Cheetah. Some pick favorite places, places that speak to them, like Beach. Some are waves, there is the occasional tree, sometimes Wind or Rain or Lightning or Sun. Other choices are more poignant. A Louisiana, post-Katrina, declared herself Hurricane. An African-American student at heavily white Elon declared herself (I am still not sure how many layers this had for her) Chameleon. A partly Native American student told us he is Buffalo: in his dreams he becomes a buffalo, runs with his fellows, and can ask them to take him other places or into other identities in turn. And unlike most students, he did not choose this totem: it was his from birth, his clan animal.

Actually, I tell the students, none of you should really think that you are doing all the choosing. It's at least as true that our totems choose us. Are there animals that regularly come to you, in dreams or awake? What animals? Perhaps you have even had specific encounters, numinous or electrifying, that stay with you? Are there days when all the world seems alive to you and you are "in your element"? What is that element?

We take some time in special sessions to declare ourselves and then to speak from the totem's place: to inhabit, as fully as we can, that animal being or natural place or force. Different classes unfold it differently. One of my recent freshman seminars spent most of the term representing world countries, organizations, and figures, taking part among other things in a Model United Nations session representing a third of the Security Council. At the end, I said: now I invite you to embrace some standpoints beyond the human, and at the same time to come back to yourselves, especially as new college students in a stage of identity-seeking and -shifting. Are you alone in this, or do you – could you – have help: guides and identifications beyond the merely human? Who might they be? Students declared themselves right in class – eager and fascinated to hear what

others had chosen, offering their own totems tentatively yet proudly – and right away we had a new “Council”, new lines of affiliation and points of view.

Already there’s a certain magic in it. Students notice, once they’ve chosen and declared their totems, that their own and others’ totems start showing up in unexpected places and ways: across our paths, on the Web, in our dreams. I hadn’t seen bunnies for years on campus until one of my freshmen chose Bunny this Spring: within days you could not turn around without seeing bunnies. Another in the same class was Shark (partly on account of a diving encounter, face to face): now, class over, I am still sending him links to shark films that won’t stop turning up on my listservs. Yet another is Dragonfly, and this seems to be the summer of, yes, dragonflies.

We borrow from the Council of All Beings design at a session where we appear as our totems, to deliver both warnings and gifts to each other and the world. This freshman class met for our Council at dusk around an off-campus fire pit. It was our last meeting as a class, our “Final”. Thunderstorms were predicted – a major front was coming through – and the evening skies were grey, but we gathered outside anyway, started the fire, began to speak. Turtle offered his patience, deliberateness: precisely the ability to go slow. Shark, the reminder that the world’s most self-congratulatory animal (guess who) needs to seriously temper his arrogance in the waters. Sun offered eternal light. Between totems, the crickets and the frogs spoke up: we gave them their turns too, waiting until they paused for Owl (that was me, in my owl-head mask and academic gowns: actually my personal totem is Daddy Longlegs, but my – philosophy’s – disciplinary totem is the Owl) to sound the drum for the next student speaker.

We made it all the way around. At the end, Owl made a toast to the class, looking back over their first year of college, best wishes for the summer. As I raised my paper cup at the end, just after my last word, there was the first peal of thunder. A startling grace note, perfectly timed. Amen.

The students drank their sparkling cider. Then, shedding mask, I invited them to fill their cups in their imagination with whatever they wanted to leave behind from this first year of college, as well as whatever part of their totem they now wanted to give back to the world – and then to throw their full cups into the fire. As they did – some in tears – the flames leapt up one last time. But by now the lightning was crackling too, mirroring the fire. We said rushed goodbyes. They sprinted, still only half returned to human, across the woods for their cars. Within half a minute, it was pouring – the start of a solid day of desperately needed hard rain. Vine Deloria writes somewhere about how Europeans consistently misunderstand Native peoples’ rain dances as means of manipulating or producing rain. Observers turn cynical when they realize that the shamans only begin rain dances when it appears that rain is in the offing

anyway. But no, says Deloria: the function of the rain dance is not to produce rain but, as he puts it, to “participate in the emerging event” – which is why of course you only dance when the rain is practically upon you. So this was *our* rain dance: a taste of what “participating” in the larger-than-human world could feel like.

Only the barest taste, of course. I don’t know, in all honesty, what the students will carry forward from this – it is so foreign to the frames of reference that we normally take to define reality. Little in the rest of their education or experience will reinforce or deepen or repeat it. Totems do have a certain sticking power: people tend to remember their totem being, at least. (*I certainly do: most of the students I remember from these classes always come with their totems in my mind, or come to mind now when I see chameleons or dragonflies or sharks...*) More than a few students, over the years, have become actively involved with the plight of endangered totem animals or places. The magic, though, is harder to hang onto – and harder to recognize in the first place. We no longer have the categories; certainly (ironically and poignantly) they are seldom offered to young people, like these, who might need them the most.

Lately I have also been teaching a course called “Environmental Visions” – an attempt to look beyond the immediate dimensions of the current crisis to longer-term, more systematic, and also more inspiring visions of green futures. Of which there are many more than one, a fact that already surprises people. We aim to get past the sense of threat and imminent disaster that hangs like a pall over any “environmental” news or thinking these days – for ultimately what we will defend “environmentally” are the alternative worlds we are inspired to create. For Environmental Visions too the students pick totems, in this case when we come to the part of the course that highlights “Connection,” a vision of humans once again co-constituting a celebratory and communicative world with other creatures of all sorts – the most inviting setting in which to explore and declare one’s own more-than-human identifications and possibilities.

The Visions course meets at the Lodge, a former church camp about a mile from campus (we bike or carpool) with a lake, a few shelters, a building with fireplace for when it is too cold to meet outside, large grassy areas where we can sit in the sun on blankets in a circle. Most of all it offers us relative quiet, the chance to be outside without distraction, with alert senses for once, in good company: with the winds that are always active; the turkey vultures wafting about and checking us out, along with the occasional hawk and chittery kingfisher; sun and the falling leaves; and, at the start of one especially memorable Fall term, lots of rain and thunderstorms as a succession of hurricanes brushed by. We spent a lot of our first few weeks meeting in the shelters.

For that Visions course we declared our totems around a smoky bonfire on a cool afternoon at the Lodge's fire circle. Windy, too, with low clouds scudding by: the smoke blew everywhere, and there was a lot of it, so we all went to our next classes smelling like we'd been camping all week. That year it turned out I had Rain; Dolphin; Jaguar (a Mexican woman with Huichol roots, whose distant shamanic ancestors might well have been jaguars too); Salmon (we read Tom Jay's lyrical essay "The Salmon of the Heart" to introduce the project, a lovely exploration of the interplay of science and myth in the formation of a totem); Bear; and many others. Everyone declared themselves and was ritually welcomed into the circle.

We also had Great Blue Heron. As it happened, we had seen a Great Blue here at the lake below the Lodge, once, early in the term. But she'd never been back, though one end of the lake is good heron feeding-ground. I'd frequent it, anyway, if I were a heron. Still, the heron's appearance that one day was part of the reason D. chose it for her totem, I think. The other part was some kind of quiet grace, a body that could be ungainly but in fact had an unmatched elegance; and a quickness too. Long periods of utter stillness punctuated by the lighting strike of the beak. Imagine the inner life.

Then came the day that D. who was also Great Blue Heron was to present her term project on animal-animal, cross-species communication. We'd spoken, often, of human-animal communication, but she wanted to go several steps farther, to look at a bigger picture. Usually she'd been very quiet and did not say much, though she was a lovely and animated person when she got going. Now she had just begun to speak, already with that same animation and self-possession, the first time for a while we had heard her speak like this. Everyone sat up a bit straighter, smiled. But now just as quickly our eyes were drawn up and behind her. D. was sitting with her back to the lake: suddenly a shadow had floated by to her right and then spiraled down toward the water. Today of all days, this exact moment of all moments, Great Blue came back. She floated down to the brilliantly sunlit end of the lake, in full view, the deeper part where feeding is (I'd think) not so good, landed in the most graceful way right in the brightest sun. There she stood for maybe half a minute, looking us over and showing herself just enough, and then just as elegantly took back off, skimmed the water down to the other end of the lake, landed and proceeded to hunt up the stream and out of sight.

We were stunned into silence. No missing the magic here, categories or no. I seriously wanted to end class right there, despite just having begun – what could you do after that? It was D.'s day, though, and she had a lot to say. So after a time we collected ourselves and began to speak again. Still, in a certain way, everything had already been said, or (more accurately) done. We came back to

that Visit repeatedly in every reflection on the class for the rest of the term. No one who experienced that moment could have any doubts that animals “communicate,” indeed in a far deeper way than any one of us, even D. herself, had yet named or even imagined. What emerged here was something primal, some kind of communicative flow vastly more powerful than language itself, something for which our only available word may once again be “magic” but which hints at far deeper receptivities and harmonies possible in the larger world. Some say that magic only happens to those who are prepared to receive it. Maybe so, in some ways. But the truth must also be more than this: for this way of putting it probably still gives ourselves too much credit. Here, anyway, it feels more as though we were given the merest hint of a pervasive unseen flow, a gift out of pure generosity, and still actually too much to assimilate. The world was just too full; it overflowed at that moment, and there we were.

I would only add: what if the world *always* is overflowing like this, only D. isn’t always there, so to speak; or maybe we or even she herself didn’t know yet that she *was* a Great Blue Heron; or maybe it was a bit nippy and we just decided to stay inside? How do we find the key again; how do we awaken again, and this time stay awake, to a world so eloquent that even the tiniest fragment of a line is almost unbearable?

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