

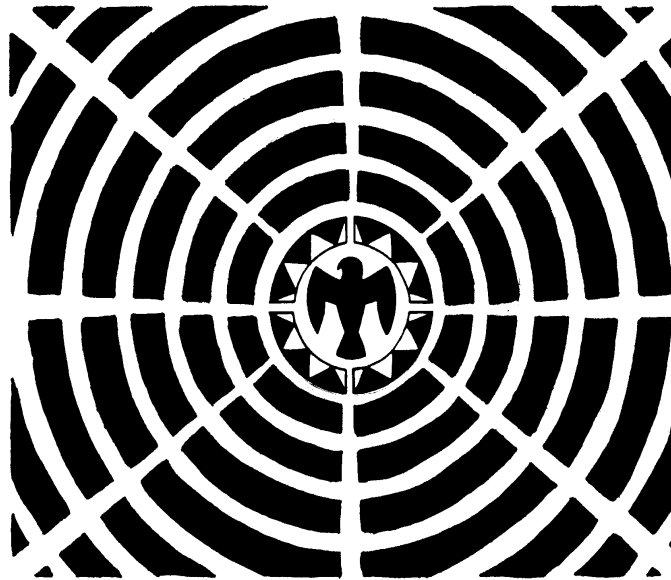


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THE BONE GAME A NATIVE AMERICAN RITUAL FOR DEVELOPING PERSONAL POWER AND GROUP OR TRIBAL CONSCIOUSNESS



THE JOURNAL OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION, Volume 13, No. 1, May, 1990

The Bone Game is an ancient, complex, and highly structured Native American ritual of personal and group transformation. It arose out of the need for conflict resolution and developed as an alternative to aggression or war. The game is played between two teams of equal size with a minimum of five persons in each team. The ritual is a contest of spirit focused within a gambling game, the essential purpose of which is to help players touch, develop, and make explicitly useful their deepest human potential.

THE BONE GAME

A NATIVE AMERICAN RITUAL FOR DEVELOPING PERSONAL POWER AND GROUP OR TRIBAL CONSCIOUSNESS

INTRODUCTION

We experiential educators spend a lot of time conducting adventure/challenge activities in the great outdoors. There is often a routine, almost ritual way in which we interact with participants to develop, in the shortest possible time, a sense of safety, competence, common goals and community, and to provide opportunities for debriefing.

Throughout time, rituals have been used by ancient and primitive cultures to facilitate experiences of depth in individuals and in groups. When shifts or transformations of consciousness were desired, experiences were almost always carried out in a sacred way. Ordeals such as rites of passage, initiation rituals, and practices of ecstatic religions have been well researched and documented (Brown, 1989; Eliade, 1958, 1974; Grof, 1976; Halifax, 1979, 1982).

Many people are drawn to the challenge and adventure of outdoor experiential education because they are in transition, and seek an initiation of one sort or another: from adolescence to adulthood; from divorce back to a well functioning single life again; during career or mid-life crisis; in search of spiritual renewal, etc.

This "call to adventure," as Joseph Campbell terms it, brings many clients to our door. Quite often, the call rings up the curtain on a mystery of transfiguration--a rite, or moment of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand (Campbell, 1968). There is a growing interest in the use of rituals within our culture. Let us turn our attention to

an explicit Native American ritual that can greatly enhance the field of outdoor experiential education.

THE BONE GAME: PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW

For thousands of years, Native Americans had to develop their personal, spiritual, and tribal resources to a maximum degree, amidst very harsh realities. They had to retain group cohesion in the face of nearly insurmountable obstacles, and work toward the realization of common goals. What can be learned from the Native American experience that can help us in our efforts to promote personal growth and transformation in experiential education? One fascinating process is called the Bone Game.¹

The Bone Game was a ritual of personal and group transformation. It arose out of the need for conflict resolution; developed as an alternative to aggression or war. The game was played between disputing elements within a tribe, between disputing tribes, or between nations in conflict. The ritual was a contest of spirit focused within a gambling game. The essential purpose of the ritual was to help players touch, develop, and make explicitly useful their deepest human potential.

First, two teams formed. Then, through the ongoing use of a Power Object--a device for focusing attention and energy--team members listened in an intense way to the step by step ever deepening self-disclosure of one another. A tremendous number of decisions had to be made in each team on the basis of consensus. For instance, five ritual roles had to be filled. Stakes to be wagered had to be decided upon, and stakes had to be accepted by the other team, before the

gambling event actually took place. Through a process of mutual sharing, in depth, players created common visions of the meaning and purpose of the game, and arrived at specific ways to play and win the game.

AN EXAMPLE

Let's say two tribes had a major conflict and were about to come to blows. The Bone Game was a way to resolve the differences while, at the same time, drawing each tribe together in a powerful way. Each tribe would determine the stakes they were willing to risk, as a symbol of their serious intent to resolve the issues at hand. For instance, one tribe might wager 30 ponies. The other tribe might wager all their winter wheat. Since a higher value was placed on human life than was placed on material possessions, each tribe was willing to set and lose significant stake rather than go to war over the dispute.

Of course one tribe would win and one would lose. The stakes were often so high that the experience immediately transcended simple winning or losing. What does it mean to win, if one tribe wins the other tribe's winter food, or their means of hunting? What does it mean to lose such important goods? The stakes were set in such a way that each individual, and the tribe as a whole, would have to explore fundamental issues and return to a sense of what truly was essential in life.

Many talents and abilities remain undiscovered, unexplored, and under-utilized in people who take part in outdoor experiential education programs. To develop these inner resources is the reason why they come to us. The ritual of the Bone Game can provide an outstanding opportunity for participants to experience, explore, develop, and share very deep aspects of themselves, in a very short period of time. The ritual enlivens the individuals who play it, helps them get in touch with imagination, intuition, inspiration, creativity, and insight, and create powerful bonds between them. Many lessons are

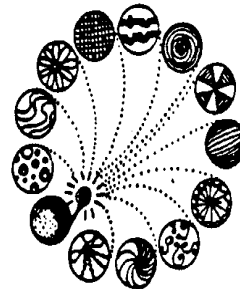
learned from this game about the differences between competition and cooperation, fear and courage, separateness and unity, timidity and power, deception and honesty, attachment and transcendence.

The Bone Game is played between any two teams of relatively equal size. The minimum number per team is five, since there are 5 ritual roles that must be filled at the beginning of the game. Finding a way to break a large group down into two equal teams is the first step of the Bone Game.

THE POWER OBJECT

The second step is the creation of a team Power Object: a device for focusing group attention that will be used throughout the game. Each person brings to the first team meeting an object of some personal value. The members of the group sit in a circle and place their objects in front of them. Each person takes a turn describing, in detail, the value and meaning of his or her object.

For instance, "This is my wallet. I got it from my grandfather before he died. It helps me remember him, and particularly...". Or, "This is a stone I found in the Rocky Mountains. I was going through a period in my life then when..." And so on. Every person takes a turn describing his or her chosen object until everyone has spoken. Then the objects are passed to the left around the circle, one at a time, until each person has examined every object. The final step is to actually select the team Power Object.



The objects are passed around again. But this time, if anyone feels the object S/he is holding is not suitable to be the team Power Object, the object is placed on the ground, thus removing it from further consideration. All objects circulate until only

one remains in circulation. This last object becomes the team Power Object.

USE OF THE POWER OBJECT

It is important to fully explain how the Power Object is used, since the ritual use of it is essential to every aspect of the Bone Game. The bridge that must exist between an individual's separateness and the full participation of all members in the life of the group must be a process that will both allow and help everyone experience and share their inner depths with one another. The use of the Power Object provides this bridge.

The person whose object is chosen to be the Power Object begins each cycle of sharing. When S/he is finished speaking, the object is passed to the person on the left. When the next person is finished speaking, the Power Object again is passed to the left, until everyone has had a chance to speak.

Whoever holds the Power Object has the full, undivided attention of everyone in the group. S/he can share thoughts, tell a story, sing a song, do a dramatic improvisation, simply hold it remain silent for a few moments, confront someone, or do anything else until S/he is finished. Then S/he relinquishes the focus of the group and passes the Power Object to the next person on the left.

If someone else in the group wants to comment or speak while another member holds the Power Object, S/he has to raise a hand and wait to be recognized by the holder of the Power Object. The person holding the Power Object can never be interrupted, for any reason whatsoever, without first choosing to recognize the other and give another permission to speak out of turn. The holder is also never obliged to recognize someone else.

This is a powerful way of using and moving personal energy. People seldom have

the undivided attention of their fellows, the time to search for their words, or the opportunity to creatively and fully express themselves to completion. The point of this, and the profound understanding of Native Americans, was that the 'Great Spirit' resides equally in all of us. Every one of us has the capacity to speak truth, to share wisdom, to counsel and advise, to heal, to know ourselves in depth, to touch the depth in others. A receptive and caring atmosphere, mutual respect, and the freedom to express ourselves in our own unique way encourages the unfoldment of our deepest human potential.

DECISION BY CONSENSUS

There are several other aspects to the use of a Power Object. Suppose someone wants to make a proposal that must be decided upon by the team like, for instance, "I propose we offer to fix dinner for the other team if we loose." When it is that person's time to hold the Power Object, S/he makes the proposal.

Every decision must be made on the basis of consensus. That means that everyone must either agree with, or not object to, a proposal presented to the group. If someone makes a proposal, it must be voted on by all group members. Thumb up means yes, thumb down means no, and open palm, face up, means a person takes a neutral stand on the proposal at hand.

When it is time for the vote, if a person disagrees with a proposal, S/he puts a thumb down. The person holding the Power Object must give all who vote against the proposal an opportunity to express the reason(s) for their negative vote, beginning with the first negative vote to the holder's left, and moving around the circle in clockwise fashion, until all have spoken. Supportive or neutral voters have no voice at this time. At the end of the sharing, the holder can make the proposal again, or amend it to include elements heard from the

group, and the vote is taken again. After the second vote, if there is still dissension, the proposal is dropped and the Power Object must be given to the next person in the circle.

It is the responsibility of every person to express his or her thoughts, feelings, intuitions or disagreements openly and honestly, to the degree that S/he has the courage to do so. If someone cannot or will not share his or her thoughts in depth, such withholding obviously greatly affects the playing of the game. Voting by consensus assures that everyone has the opportunity for equal power in the decision making process--whether or not that privilege is exercised.

After the Power Object is chosen, the next task is the creation of the group name. The Power Object passes around the group and anyone who wishes can share a favorite name and its relevance to the group or to the game. After everyone has spoken, names are voted on, one at a time, until consensus is reached.

RITUAL ROLES

There are five ritual roles or offices that must be filled within each team. These roles are also filled on the basis of consensus. A role is announced, the description of the role is made and then those who feel they want to fill the role speak up, one at a time, passing the Power Object clockwise around the circle until everyone has spoken. All interested persons present their credentials, background, or reasons they feel they are appropriate for the job. Then, by voting on the basis of consensus, the role is filled. The roles are: two negotiators, two hidiers, and one pointer.

NEGOTIATORS. There are two negotiators per group. One negotiator per group is verbal and can speak to the verbal negotiator of the other team. But each group also has a silent negotiator, who is an ally and consultant to the verbal negotiator when these

transactions are taking place. The silent negotiators remind the verbal negotiators about the spirit of their team, its wishes, intent, strategies, etc., but away from the line at which negotiations take place. The silent negotiators also report to their team what they saw take place between verbal negotiators. They can interpret mood, information, or their sense of the other team as portrayed through the actions of the other verbal negotiator, but they never speak to anyone on the other side.

Negotiators can never make decisions for their group. They only transmit information. If and when a decision is called for, the negotiators must return to their group where, by consensus, the decision is made. Even the place where the negotiators meet to discuss and exchange information must be negotiated and voted on within each group, after the first unpredictable contact is made between negotiators. All communication from one team to the other must be channeled through the negotiators. From the moment two teams form to play the Bone Game, no further dialogue or conversation can occur between members of opposing teams, until the game is done.

STAKES. Each team must decide what they are willing to wager in order to play the Bone Game. The stakes can be a collection of individual items offered by group members to the other team, or it can be a group stake: a service from one group to the other, an activity, a gift, etc. Whatever the stakes are, they must be consensually validated before they are offered to the other team. When the winning stakes are to be collected must also be clearly negotiated before the game begins.

The negotiators from each team meet to exchange information, then return to their teams to discuss issues and make decisions. Each group can either accept or reject the other team's stakes, proposals, whatever. The outcome of team deliberations is communicated to the other team through the

negotiator, and the work goes on and on until it is time to play the game. But once the stakes of one team are accepted by the other, no matter what else follows, that team cannot change its mind or renegotiate stakes again.

The stakes are real. Whatever an individual or group bets, the relevant person(s) must be willing to deliver the bet upon losing the Bone Game. The negotiating, decision making, proposing and voting are all critically important parts of the Bone Game ritual. It cannot be rushed or short circuited.

HIDERS. After the Power Object and the group name are chosen, the ritual roles are filled, the stakes are agreed upon, and the place where the Bone Game will occur are decided upon, it is time to play the game itself. Each group has chosen two Hiders. The Bone Game derives its name from the fact that Native Americans used four 'magic bones' with which to play. These were carved or painted bones, small enough to fit within a person's closed hand. These bones were magic in the sense that the whole tribe had energized or protected them with caring, attention, special chants, etc., the guessing or good hiding of which determined the outcome of the game.

Two of the bones (or stones, buttons, coins, whatever) are worth one point each, if found by the Pointer of the other group, and two of the bones have no point value. Through negotiation, it is decided which group will hide first and which will point first. The pointer tries to guess where the bones are hidden within the four closed fists of the other group's two Hiders. The Hiders go away from the line of play and decide who will hold which bones where and how. For instance, one Hider might hold one point bone in one hand and one worthless bone in the other, and the 2nd Hider might do the same. Or one Hider might hold both magic bones in one hand and nothing in the other, etc. Before the beginning of the first round of play, each team must show their valued and worthless bones to the other team

so that there can be no dispute when the Pointers do their choosing.

POINTERS. Each team selects one Pointer. This person's job is to go to the line of play when it is time, and point with his or her index finger(s) to two of the four closed hands of the Holders of the other team. The Holders of the other team must immediately show the contents of the selected hands and, if a point or two is made, this information is transmitted to each team by the negotiators.

Each team comes up with their own unique way of helping their Pointer choose well and their Hiders hide well. The persons chosen for these roles often say they have some special gift, to help them find or hide the bones. Each team stands silently behind the actual line of play and only the negotiators can speak at the line, and then, only to each other. The Pointer can take as long as he or she needs to tune into where the magic bones might be held before actually making the guess. After the guesses are made, it is the other team's turn to guess. The other team can guess right away, or go away from the line of play to prepare for their turn. Whichever team collects seven points first is the winner.

CONCLUSION

Finally, it should be mentioned that, when there is a limited time frame in which to play, the Bone Game often is not played to completion. The author has seen the game completed in one day, but he has also played the game for five days in a wilderness setting, and the game did not finish! The decisions are complex, the stakes can be hard to decide upon, the roles can be hard to fill--all on the basis of consensus. Time can run out before the seven points are won.

But, from the moment the two teams form, the magic, mystery and wisdom of the Native American experience profoundly impacts all participants as they touch the

depths within themselves, and each other. The Bone Game is a dynamic and powerful experience. It delivers a truly transformative experience for all who play it and, for this reason, deserves to be incorporated into the field of experiential education.

SELECTED PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK (not included in the journal article)

The Bone Game is not played light heartedly. It's a meeting of minds and bodies in an effort to achieve something. It's a struggle where individuals work toward a common goal. It's a negotiative process, a chance to be heard, a chance to confront and work through conflict. Power is a tool that demands respect. Holding the power creates a space where one can share who they are, where one person can speak or act, where one can learn about one's inner self and transcend the personality.

The most difficult aspect of my experience in the BONE GAME was how to speak up when I felt anger. I was unsure of how to express it without being judgmental or blaming. Fearful that if I expressed negative feelings, I would be rejected. Another difficulty I had was my unsureness as to my beliefs--why was I so easily swayed by the opinions of others?

The most important aspect of the BONE GAME was in taking the time to really listen to others; taking the time to check in on my own thoughts and feelings. There will always be polarities, there will always be struggle, and the realization that I do have a contribution to make to the world.

The BONE GAME was a memorable experience for me. Admittedly, it is a difficult process yet I do not regret taking the opportunity to expose myself to it as well being exposed by it. Since the two day program, I have introduced the Power Object of the "game" to my colleagues in the movement

therapy department as a means to develop our own awareness within the rehabilitation hospital in which we work. Linda Pilus, Brighton, Ma.

The ritual aspect of the game obstructs recourse to habitual ego-serving patterns of thought and behavior and assures full and equal participation by every member of the team in the group process. It acts as a circle of containment for energies, intensifying them and focusing them in such a way that each player is continually obliged to chose between copping out or looking deeper into him/herself for self-knowledge and transcendent wisdom.

When I was in possession of the Power Object, I felt decidedly ambivalent about holding the group's attention and having its sanction to exercise power openly, which required self-exposure and self-revelation. On the one hand, I welcomed the opportunity to assume leadership. On the other, I felt constrained by fear of the possible consequences of self-revelation and the open exercise of power. As a result, whenever I held the Power Object, I tended to assume the role of disinterested mediator rather than creative contributor.

The most difficult aspect of my experience was in resisting the temptation, as pressures intensified and pushed us toward taking greater personal risks, to discredit the game and withdraw from it. Letting go of my wish to be right and make others wrong. Feeling acutely uncomfortable that my motivations, needs, etc., might be disclosed. But the most interesting and exciting aspect of the game was in experiencing a group of suspicious strangers transformed into a group bonded by love and a sense of shared interests. Discovering qualities, gifts and needs in others which belied my initial stereotyping of them. Seeing how dynamic interaction among members of a group changed each of us. Discovering the basis of some of my own habitual response patterns

and feeling free to change them. Peggy McMillen, Guilford, Ct.

The group was very strong on the need for structure. We explored organization and structure, but we tried to avoid emotion and feeling to win the game. We also planned the strategy to be used in the game. As we discussed the stakes to be risked, we allowed each person to decide the value for himself. We didn't challenge each other on the value we placed on our wager. I soon learned that the other team was playing the game from directly the opposite side of life we were. They had decided to wager the highest stakes they could, knowing that if you wager everything it doesn't matter if you win or lose. This really showed me how I have been living my life. I have been attempting to win but have been risking less than I could. The Bone Game is the game of life! I have built structure, now I need to breathe life and emotion into it. Jason Conway, Burlington, Vermont.

The beauty of the two day program was the oneness that evolved; the love, caring, and sense of brotherhood. In my role of negotiator, I felt my own desire to command fall away to the more spiritual desire to serve. I held within me love for the people I represented and also their trust in me. It was a very humbling and powerful experience. Annie Dunn, Washington, D.C.

How did I feel with the Power Object? Scared! Apologetic. Self-effacing. Exhilarated and excited. A tremendous weight of responsibility. I began to learn the dimensions of that power placed in my hands by the consensus of the group. I am still confused: about the relationship between power and leadership, between the power of aggression and the power of passivity or helplessness. I have much to think about, much to feel about, much to learn.

The most interesting and exciting aspect of this game for me was the sense of

total learning--constant, all-absorbing, inner and outer, conscious and unconscious. Learning to listen, to hear; to recognize that my anger is tied to fear and to gain the courage to confront that fear; to know when to stay and try again, when to cut the moorings and move on; to recognize, to cherish and to have the courage to act upon my creative impulses. Betsey Granda, Newark, Delaware.

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1. Grateful acknowledgment is made to Robert Greenway, Associate Professor of Psychology at Sonoma State University in Rhonert Park, California, from whom the author learned the Bone Game in 1975. This ritual has been conducted dozens of times since then--with Federal agencies, non-profit organizations, corporations, colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada.

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