

“Council of All Beings” at Green River Preserve

By Valerie Vickers and Kaleigh Oleynik

Each May my teaching team of seventh grade teachers from Greensboro Day School and about ten parents take our students to Green River Preserve, a beautiful private wildlife preserve and camp near Brevard, North Carolina. Sandy Schenck, the director and the mentors, chosen for their skills, abilities and love for children and the Earth, lead challenging programs that include primitive Earth and Native American skills, music and crafts, and rigorous nature hikes. This past May we decided to try a new type of evening activity based on the *Council of All Beings* program created by Johanna Macy and friends. The students made masks of their chosen plant, animal or element at school two days before our trip. They were to begin thinking like the being in their mask to portray its place in the world and what it might want humans to know. The mentors including Mike Sanderson, Herbie Walters, Snow Bear, Hawk Hurst and others worked with me to create a plan that was meaningful and effective for the entire group of seventy students. The magical experience is shared in an essay by Kaleigh Oleynik and in a poem that I wrote several days after the experience.

Council Fire of All Beings (Kaleigh Oleynik)

On our second and last night at Green River, we held a *Council of All Beings*. I think this was a moving experience for everyone because it helped us examine the world from all animals' and elements' perspectives, and even from the viewpoint of the world itself. We realized, from sharing and listening, how much the earth had given us, and it became clear as we spoke that humans were hardly repaying Earth for her gracious gifts. The sky told us of the pollution carried into her sweeping winds, the fire warned us not to misuse him, the tree told us of the fear it feels when humans destroy its forests with axes and saws, and the flowers reminded us how bleak the world would be without them. It seemed like everyone felt more connected with the inhabitants of the world by

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the end of the evening, after we had made our promises to the earth and discussed the problems we could remedy. As we celebrated nature to the low, steady beat of the drums and crackle of the fire, something amazing happened. Earth sent little messengers to dance and share the joy of the night with us, and we marveled and danced among the tiny creatures of light, knowing that we would never forget *The Council of All Beings*.

The Green River Earth Dance (Valerie Vickers)

Bah—buh da buh—da buh da buh
Bah—buh da buh—da buh da buh

Djembe rhythms punctuated the silence
Like heartbeats of the great Mother, Gaia.
While haunting flute melodies swirled into the darkness
As hawks soaring in an air current.
Low-pitched didgeridoos echoed calls like humpback whales
Vocalizing an ancient language.
The pulse of life resonated from one mountain peak to another.
The orchestra of earth musicians played with the whippoorwill.

Bum, ba bum ba, bum ba bum ba
Dum, da dum, da, dum da dum da

As the sun nestled into the mountains, dusk turned to dark.
A blazing campfire devoured wood of all sizes
Bending light and shadow as luminous ghosts.
Here, the young people danced with abandon.
Some played instruments; others shouted with joy,
Wildly celebrating their Counsel—
The Counsel of All Beings.
The place where all creation was given human voice.

Bum, ba bum ba, bum ba bum ba
Dum, da dum, da, dum da dum da

One by one, each human became their hand-made mask.
Each plant, animal, element told its story
A story of being—a strand in the Web.
The horse, the grass, the mountain, the bear,
The ocean, the monkey, the fire, the bird,
The mosquito, the tree, the frog, the sky,
The wolf, the snake, the fish, the river—
Each shared its life and was thanked by the others.

Bum, ba bum ba, bum ba bum ba
Dum, da dum, da, dum da dum da

Then the masks were dropped; human voices returned one by one.
Twelve voices were chosen to lift up their wisdom.
All climbed higher up the mountain to the sacred counsel fire.
Cedar smoke cleared the way as the special place was entered.
Sitting on the cool Earth amidst the trees and the rocks
The listening began—a profound listening that honored all life
With promises to the Earth to honor the Web.
Each one challenged to carry action to the great Circle beyond.

Bum, ba bum ba, bum ba bum ba
Dum, da dum, da, dum da dum da

Silently they came, in hundreds, then thousands
As they circled the sacred sanctuary
Where the Counsel wisdom was shared.
Bright enduring lights of tiny fireflies
Golden and neon green in the black thicket of the forest
Only rising to knee height in waves up the mountainside
Pulsing to the rhythm of the drums and the dance.
The awe, the wonder, the synchronicity.

Bum, ba bum ba, bum ba bum ba
Dum, da dum, da, dum da dum da

Had the Earth sent the dance of fireflies
As thanks for bringing voice to all beings?
Or was it coincidence to be there at the moment of emergence,
Experiencing the presence of the glowing ones?
Perhaps the Cherokee Little People brought the lights
Sharing their presence to celebrate earth/human connection?
How powerful the response of the Earth to the stories
A transcendent moment of wonder and love.

Bum, ba bum ba, bum ba bum ba
Dum, da dum, da, dum da dum da

The fireflies lit the Earth, while the stars lit the sky.
The young people left the forest and climbed down to the field
Aware that some great mystery had filled them with awe.
The dancing and marveling continued;
The magical mood lifted spirits even higher
As the Earth people, the fireflies and the Cosmos danced
A celebratory dance of communion.

Bah—buh da buh—da buh da buh
Bah—buh da buh—da buh da buh

