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The Talking Stick for healthy communication

By Neva Howell

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One of the most valuable tools for honoring close relationships and for learning respect, honor, and listening skills is The Talking Stick. The Talking Stick (Native-American in origin) is simply a Tree Person branch that has been so dedicated as a Talking Stick to be used for creating more open and sincere dialog.

Individual indigenous groups have more specific information and ritual. I don't represent myself as any kind of authority of Native ways -- that is the work of the Elders within each of the Native Peoples -- but only share the value I've received thru use of this communication tool.

First, there must be total agreement between the two parties that, when The Talking Stick is present, the rules of the ritual will be honored by both. The rules are simple.

When one wishes to be allowed to speak fully, freely, and without interruption, they pick up The Talking Stick. While it is being held, the other person listens ONLY. The other person doesn't interrupt or insert. The other person attempts, to the best of their ability, not to interject vocal, or even physical responses to what is being shared but to ONLY listen with an open and unjudgmental ear. When the one who is talking is finished, The Talking Stick is laid down and the other person then has the opportunity to pick up the Stick and to speak openly and freely.

One of the great values of this tool, from my own perspective and experience, is that you may begin to realize how much of what you started to say was only reaction. By the time the stick is passed to you, something has shifted. In the waiting, there has been a change.

There is a new attentiveness, and less of the need to defend or put in your "two cents worth" after every sentence your partner says. Somehow, this simple yet profound process teaches us how to ferret out what is most important within all that is said by our partner, and we learn to respond to what is most important. A lot drops away, and loses importance, when we are forced to only listen.

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Eventually, the mind lets go of all the various things it thinks it wants to say, since it begins to understand that it cannot speak just yet. In that mental release, new understanding is possible. I learned about the Talking Stick through Lakota friends. I am deeply grateful for this knowledge, and feel the use of this Sacred Tool has enriched my life.

If you really want to gain the fullest benefit from the relationships you have chosen at this time, make a Talking Stick and use it. You can find a special stick in the woods, use a length of cane, or any other natural item. Personalize it with spiritual medicine that represents both you and your partner (and children, if you have any—they should be in family circles and listened to as closely as you will be learning to listen to each other). You can add feathers, crystals, stones, sprigs of sage, etc. If you'd like further guidance, in creating the Talking Stick according to Native–American tradition, seek the guidance of a teacher of Native–American ancestry.

Though it may be challenging at first, to let someone speak without the need to interrupt or respond, you will find that it becomes more and more a way of communicating, even when the stick is not present. The more you use it, the more you will learn about patience and the more you will discover about those closest to you and also, about yourself.

I've often thought that it would be a perfect world if we could all walk as if each person, at all times, carried a Talking Stick.

Neva is a wellness counselor, spiritual healer and reflexologist. She maintains an extensive health and Spirit website at <http://www.healthynewage.com>

THE TALKING STICK—A man's promise to give undivided attention!

By Gina M. Woods

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Have you ever heard of a Talking Stick? I hadn't until two days ago when my husband presented me with one! "Okay..." I

thought, "Is this supposed to be some joke about me talking too much or what?" But then he continued his presentation saying, "Honey, I know that sometimes you think I'm not listening to you. I have to admit, sometimes you're right. But you are the love of my life, and even when I'm distracted, I always want you to be my first priority. That's why I made this for you...I give you this Talking Stick as a symbol of my commitment to always put you first, no matter what. If there's ever a time when you don't think I'm paying attention to you, or if you think I'm ignoring something important...just pick up this Talking Stick. I promise to listen, without interruption, while you tell me what's on your mind." Wow! What woman wouldn't love that? A promise of undivided attention any time we want it! Does this man realize what he has just done?

I came to discover that the Talking Stick has been used for centuries by many American Indian tribes as a means of just and impartial hearing. The stick was commonly used in council circles to designate who had the right to speak. Whoever holds the Talking Stick within his hands has the power of words. When matters of great concern came before the council, the leading elder would hold the stick and begin the discussion. When he finished what he had to say he would hold out the stick, and whoever wished to speak after him would take it. In this manner the stick was passed from one individual to another until anyone who wished to speak

had done so. The stick was then passed back to the leading elder for safekeeping. It carries respect for free speech and assures the speaker that he has the freedom and power to say what is in his heart without fear of reprisal or humiliation.

So how does this Talking Stick effect our relationships? A major difference between vibrant marriages and those that end in divorce is the way the couples communicate...the way they handle disagreements and hurts. In healthy marriages, disagreements are handled as they occur by discussing the situation until both partners are satisfied with the result or some compromise has been agreed upon. Nothing kills a relationship and romance like "mud-slinging" screaming matches or attempts to punish with the "silent treatment." This is where the Talking Stick really works its magic! I know of at least one marriage counselor who uses the Talking

Stick as part of her marriage therapy techniques.

But also imagine what positive effects this form of communication could have on family relations as well! Take my family for example: I have three children, ages 2, 5, & 14. The teenager is convinced that NO ONE listens to him, the toddler MAKES SURE that everyone listens to her, and the 5-year-old desperately tries to have his views heard above the other two! It's quite the circus some days! Now that we have the Talking Stick, EVERYONE will be heard. And hopefully all family members will begin to feel like their opinions are being heard and really do count. I think it will be a great family communication tool.

Please visit <http://www.acaciart.com/stories/archive6.html> if you'd like to read more about the history of the Talking Stick and some of the symbolism behind the items used in making one. There is also a picture of what one might look like.

By now, you may be inspired to make your own Talking Stick for your family. Go for it! Be creative! My husband used ideas from the article above and added different types of beads to symbolize each family member and some other personal symbolism that only our family would appreciate. He also typed out a "story" explaining the history of the stick and included the meanings of all the symbolism he used to create it. One of my favorite parts is, "The fork in the stick represents disagreement which is natural between different members of any tribe. The fork is short and ends sharply to remind us that a solution to all conflict is possible and need not end in a lonely journey for any member

of the tribe." The main idea is that it is made with love and out of respect for the family unit.

We have our stick hung in a prominent area of our house for all guests to see and the "story" is framed beside it. Quite a conversation piece!

As for my husband...I'd have to say that he really outdid himself on this project. I never would have believed that receiving a STICK could mean so much. I'd like to share with you the final sentences from his story, "The Talking Stick is given from the loving heart of the tribe leader. This

token of love is so that every tribal member remains together until the sun sets for the last time on our day. The love of an eagles flight, Chief Phillip!"

Gina Woods is the publisher of "E-Romance Weekly," an on-line weekly newsletter offering exciting "romantic recipes" to rekindle the romance in any relationship. For more information, visit <http://www.spiritwithindesigns.com/E-Romance/subscribe.html> or send email to ginawoods@alltel.net.



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