

A National Film Board of Canada Release



Totem Talk

Cover Image: Randy Koyanagi



VHS

C9196 167

Totem Talk

Background Notes

Oral Tradition

Storytelling is deeply rooted in the ancient life and culture of First Nations peoples. Traditional narratives were and continue to be told and retold by master orators. Ancient storytellers had numerous tools for documenting and preserving culture such as totem poles, masks and wampum belts. These tools act as a reminder, keep a record, send messages, bind agreements, give responsibility to an individual and vouch for the integrity of a speaker. The oral tradition is practiced in conjunction with dramatic productions, dance performances, song, prayer and ritual.

Trickster

The trickster is an important figure for First Nations orators. Trickster humorously reflects the creation of the world and our preoccupation with balance and harmony. He is both transformer and culture-hero. In his role as culture-hero, trickster often inadvertently benefits humans. Trickster stories possess a timeless quality and portray essential relationships in traditional cultures. These relationships encompass interactions between humans and animals, humans and the land, and reality and imagination.

Community

The most important relationship is that which humans share with each other – a relationship that is embodied within the idea of community. Whether the community is a loosely knit group within an urban setting, a traditional village or a changing one linking reserve and city, the community is essential to providing a sense of identity and place. Communities exist as webs of kinship that come from a First Nations sense of family. A family encompasses those related through heritage, marriage, adoption or acceptance.

*Producer/Writer/
Director*
Annie Frazier
Henry

NFB Producer
George Johnson

Traditional Artist
J. Bradley Hunt

Animator
Curt Randall

Camera
Rolf Cutts

Sound
Marc Benoit

Musical Director
Annie Frazier
Henry

Music
Terry Frewer
Rap Music
New Breed

Actors
Morgan Rose
David Thomas
Michael
Sherwood

*NFB Executive
Producer*
Svend-Erik
Eriksen

22 minutes

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3) Setting Goals

Choose a life journey with a particular goal in mind. Describe it in words, illustrations or song. What will it look like physically? What will it feel like emotionally? What will you achieve mentally? How will it affect your spirituality? How will you know you have accomplished your goal?

4) Meeting Challenges

Brainstorm situations you might encounter at home, at school or in the future, where challenges require careful planning to ensure success. Make a success chart to show the skills and qualities you need to be successful. Encourage additions to the chart as the challenges are met.

Biography: Joshua Bradley Hunt

Joshua Bradley Hunt is Kwakiutl-Heiltsuk from Waglisla, BC (Bella Bella). He began drawing as a young boy at the Bella Bella Indian Day School. During his high school years at Port Alberni Residential School, he concentrated on art and later attended the Vancouver Art School. In 1973, he received a Bachelor of Education degree with a double art major from the University of British Columbia.

Mr. Hunt taught elementary school at Bella Bella and Sechelt for 11 years, before deciding to concentrate on art. Recently, he carved three large totem poles. He continues to work in all the media of Northwest Coast art.

Mr. Hunt makes wide use of animal forms as symbols of family traditions. Some masks are a form of the crest which corresponds to an ancestral name or clan. In depicting the animals, Mr. Hunt portrays aspects of his subjects whether they are visible or not. For example, the internal anatomical structure of a creature may be depicted alongside the external anatomy.

Biography: Annie Frazier Henry

Composer, writer, performer and award-winning filmmaker, Annie Frazier Henry is of Blackfoot, Sioux and French heritage. She has directed two poetry films, *Visions* and *Words of Wisdom*, which have received international recognition. Her half-hour film *Ladies of the Inlet* was broadcast nationally on CBC TV in 1996.

Her credits as a composer and musician include the score for director Loretta Todd's film **The Learning Path** (for which she also performed the music), as well as the music for her own films and tracks for the TV series *Lonesome Dove*.

Annie is one of the founders and directors of the Native Cultural and Theatre Art Society — a self-esteem program for youth focusing on performance, visual art and multimedia skills combined with Aboriginal culture and spiritual awareness. She lives in Vancouver.

Pre-viewing Activities

1) Summarize Obstacles

All children have the opportunity and the potential to become well-balanced adults, yet one of life's greatest challenges is the transition from youth to adulthood. In this difficult transition, character development, relationship problems and personal abilities come to the fore as young people make important life choices.

This transition can be seen as a journey; summarize the major obstacles that can keep young people from achieving success.

2) Self-Examination

First Nations philosophies seek to find balance in life — a way of meeting needs in all four areas of our lives: spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. To achieve health and well-being, the four aspects of human development should be balanced. The Medicine Wheel is a powerful tool for achieving this.

Make your own Medicine Wheel: draw a large circle, divide it into quarters, and label each quadrant: "physical," "emotional," "mental" and "spiritual." Fill in each quadrant with words or illustrations to show how needs are or are not being met. An example of a positive emotional trait is to spend time with a grandmother; a negative physical trait is to neglect fitness.

Post-viewing Activities

1) Making Choices

The Medicine Wheel can also be used to analyze a dilemma. With reference to the Wheel, draw, illustrate or paint the changes in the lives of the young people in the video. Show the turning points or the decisions that led to the change.

To extend this activity, compare city life with traditional First Nations life. Is the way of meeting needs in the four basic areas very different for different lifestyles?

The Medicine Wheel helps us to focus on conscious and unconscious actions and future pathways. To fully understand the Medicine Wheel requires the help of an elder. Contact a First Nations organization near you to learn more.

2) Diary

Put yourself in the shoes of one of the people in the video. Write diary entries showing what you have learned through this journey. What have you learned from your self and from listening to others? What did the "dream experience" teach you?

Animals in Traditional Northwest Native Stories and Art

Animals work as metaphors in storytelling. The role of the animal varies from legend to legend. Sometimes figures have meaning known only to the totem pole carver or owner. The following are some of the most common animal symbols and their meaning.

Raven: Raven is the chief character of many adventures. In Northwest Coast stories, Raven is a trickster who liberates daylight; makes rivers; fills rivers with salmon; marries a dead twin woman; secures the tides from Wolf; causes the tides to turn; liberates herring; overcomes the southeast wind; paints the birds, and is the guardian of fire, soil and water.

Frog: Frog is the crest of several clans. In some stories, Frog is associated with calling humans back from the dead. He also brings wealth from underwater places.

Bear: Bear heads the council of the animal world. Semi-divine, Bear is a link between the human and spirit worlds. Bear can enslave humans and sometimes live among humans. Bear gives power to those hunters who are able to kill him.

Thunderbird: Thunderbird is the chief of the bird village. He eats whales, salmon and double-headed serpents. Thunderbird produces lightning and wind storms. He can see all things in the world. Thunderbird lives in the spirit world but will act as an intermediary between humans and the creator.

Butterfly: Butterfly specializes in the art of transformation and helps us see the stages of our lives. Butterfly shares colours and the joys of creation with the world.

Killer Whale: Killer whale lives in the west at the outer edge of the oceans. The journey to his house takes four days. He sometimes visits this side of the ocean.

Wolf: Wolf is an ancestor to tribal divisions. He is head chief of a tribe of mythical people.

Totem Talk

Traditional Northwestern Native spiritual images combine with cutting-edge computer animation in this surreal story about the power of tradition.

Three urban Native teens are whisked away to an imaginary land by a magical raven. Here, the young people meet a totem pole whose characters (a raven, a frog and a bear) come to life, becoming their teachers, guides and friends — demonstrating their significance to Northwest Native cultures and allowing the teens to understand the strength of their own traditions.

Featuring a special interview segment with J. Bradley Hunt, the celebrated Northwest Coast Native artist on whose work the computer-animated characters in **Totem Talk** are based.

Produced by Full Regalia Productions, in co-production with the National Film Board of Canada, in association with Bravo!, the Shaw Children's Programming Initiative, the Cable Production Fund, BC Cultural Services, Vision TV, CFRN-TV, CIBC — Interim Financing, Native Cultural and Theatre Arts Society, and Knowledge Network.

Director: Annie Frazier Henry

**Producers: Annie Frazier Henry (Full Regalia Productions)
George Johnson (NFB)**

22 minutes

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