

Coyote's Questions & Life Defeats Death

Art Form:	story
Multi-Disciplines:	Science, Art, Language Arts
Suggested grade-level range:	2—8
You will need:	
Time:	1 hour

Overview

Inquiry is one of the surest paths to learning. The fundamental human questions which lead to recognitions of our place in the universe are explored in the story Coyote's Questions, and inquiry about the processes life uses to ensure survival are explored in the story "Life Defeats Death in the Desert."

Story: Coyote's Questions (Mandan Indians) Retold by John Caddy

Long, long ago, in the First Time, Coyote the Trickster-God who was also First Creator, was walking around the world one day when he saw the Human Beings. He grinned, with his red tongue lolling over his teeth. People seemed very odd to Coyote. Only two legs—they could not walk properly—only lurch forward as if falling! No fur. Always yapping! He tried to imagine being something so strange. "What would being a human be like?" he said.

So Coyote put himself into a kernel of corn in the humans' garden, and waited until a girl ate the corn. When she swallowed the kernel of corn, it didn't stop at her stomach but went right to her womb and made her pregnant. In the First Time, things like this could happen,

So in nine months Coyote was born as a human being. The girl who bore him vanished into the Spirit world, for she had given birth to a Spirit. When he was a little boy, he was a little different from the others, because he would always ask everyone he saw, "Who am I? Where did I come from? Are you my mother?" People would laugh and shake their heads.

Then Coyote took to wandering the prairies, and when he came to a cottonwood tree by a stream he would say "Hello. Who am I? Where did I come from? Are you my mother?" And the cottonwood tree would just shake its leaves.

When Coyote saw Red-tailed Hawk circling the sky above him, he cupped his hand to his mouth and yelled out, “Hello. Who am I? Where did I come from? Are you my mother?” But Hawk just said “Skreeee” and waved his wings.

Coyote grew into a man with the humans, and everyone knew he was different, and maybe a little holy, because he never stopped asking his questions: “Who am I? Where did I come from?” But he was well liked, for he was a good hunter and a strong warrior and a fine dancer to the Powers. And, he was very good at playing tricks.

One time Coyote went off alone on a long hunt. He was far from the people's town when a great storm seized the sky and black clouds rolled across the prairie toward him. Before he knew it the storm was on top of him. Coyote stood his ground and stared up at a Thunderhead with rain lashing his face and cried, “Hello. Who am I? Where did I come from? Are you my mother?” Thunderhead roared and sent down a bolt of lightning that struck Coyote right between the eyes!

Then there was a flurry of motion and a yip-yip-yipping and a brown streak race across the prairies to a nearby butte and sat on top, panting with his red tongue lolling over his teeth, and Coyote remembered everything. He chased his tail for a minute laughing, then he barked three times at Thunderstorm, rolled over and over in the grass and dust and barked “Hello Mother!” How good to have four legs! What a good trick he had played on himself!

Coyote jumped up and raced toward the human's town. When he arrived he ran right to the center of the lodges and barked “I am Coyote and I come from the Earth, my mother.” And the people gathered round to hear him.

And among the smiling people was the girl, returned from the Spirit world.

And now, every year at this time, Coyote returns and leads the people in the dance asking everyone he sees, “Who am I? Where did I come from? Are you my mother?”

END

Discuss:

- All humans ask Coyote's questions about themselves as they become self-aware.
- The study of Life on Earth (ecology) begins with the same big questions.
- Coyote's questions are personal, and we believe that by making the study of ecology intensely personal to students, we can make a difference in attitudes toward Earth.
- Our process for making it personal is making art—which is by nature an act of celebration.

Art-Making Possibilities

- draw or paint a scene from the story that was fun. Enter in Journal.
- Write a story of your own about something Coyote did when he was human. If you like, make it sound like the story you heard. Enter in Journal.

Story Two: Life Defeats Death in the Desert

There is a little toad that lives in the desert country of the American West. A desert is a tough place for a toad to make a living and to reproduce, for as you know, deserts are dry and toad tadpoles need water to live inside.

In dry years these toads do not sing; they do not lay eggs; there are no little tadpoles making a pool wiggle.

But in some blessed years, it has rained, and when the season is upon them the male toads go looking for pools to sing from. They hop into a fresh pool of water where last year there was only dust. And they stay there, and they sing. They sing for the large-eyed beautiful females to come to the water, they sing with a sense of urgency, for the desert evaporates water quickly. Come quick, come now, their message repeats. It's lovely, but it's now. Hurry!

The females do come and the singers do clasp them and together in the pond they lay and fertilize eggs. The eggs float for a few days, then hatch into tiny tadpoles, who wiggle about enthusiastically for bits of algae growing quickly in this temporary desert pool.

If it's an ordinary year, there will be a little more rain, and the pool will exist for the six weeks it takes the little tadpoles to grow arms and legs and learn to breathe air and live on land. But this year is not an ordinary year.

Here our story gets hard.

The sun is fierce this year, and within four weeks of hatching the sun burns the pool right into air. Everything in the pool dies. Tadpoles are almost entirely water, so you cannot even make out their bodies in the dusty hole that was a pool. If you could distinguish them you could see under magnification that their hind legs had not quite emerged; they were still a long way from being little toads able to survive on land.

Now our story leaps ahead a year.

Same pool, same kind of tadpoles, again four weeks after hatching from the eggs. But this year the fierce sun has been more kind. The pool is half gone, but half there, and crowded together in the remaining water are many, many little tad-toads, almost ready to leave the water and hop onto land.

Their tails are absorbed right down to a nub, and their four legs swim vigorously. They are tiny toadlets, but other than size they look just like Mom and Dad.

What happened here? Why did the tadpoles die the first year but not the second?

The first batch of tadpoles did die and their bodies stayed right in that dried-up dust. When the rains returned and filled that pool again, a different kind of song began in the pool. The corpses of the dead tadpoles told the new living tadpoles to hurry, hurry, grow your legs fast 'cause there isn't much time!

The song was a chemical message delivered through Time by death. When the rain came and filled the little pool, the dried bodies of last year's tadpoles merged with the water. When the living tadpoles' bodies received through their skins the chemical signal in the water that said tadpoles died here last year, they began to develop much faster than they ordinarily would, compressing six weeks of development into four weeks, so if the sun this year had dried up the pond in four weeks, the toad-lets would have lived, just barely.

So what? What can this toad teach us about life?

- **This is a story where the result of death is more life.**
- This is a story where life defeats death.
- **This little toad has found a way for the dead to communicate with the living.**

This story is filled with wonder.

Life is like that. It's amazing. Life is stubborn and Life is tough; Life will get right down in the nitty-gritty and even use the corpses of the young to send its survival messages.

How did this simple little toad accomplish this complex survival strategy? He must be smarter than he looks.

Life is smarter than it looks. Life is brilliant at the only thing it must be brilliant at: Life survives—if there is a way to stay alive, Life finds that way. Life hangs on. Life on Earth has had three billion years of practice. Even little toads with brains the size of peas get pretty smart with enough practice. How many creatures have found a way for the dead to communicate with the living?

Almost every square inch of Earth's surface is filled with Life (except for fresh lava) and each living thing has an amazing story of how it learned to not just survive, but to thrive.

Every cubic inch of the oceans' surface layers is also filled with life, much of it tiny floating life called plankton.

Almost every cubic inch of Earth's air is filled with Life as well. The atmosphere has its own plankton of spores, seeds, pollen, spiders and insects. The winds are an enormous dispersal system which spreads life all over Earth. Think of all the dandelion seeds your own breath has launched on a journey on the wind. All dandelions need to survive and spread are kids having fun and a little breeze.

A sample of air from a mile above your house in summer will contain dandelion seeds, thistle seeds, daisy seeds, grass seeds and the downy seeds of cottonwood trees. It will also contain millions of microscopic spores of fungi (funguses) and yeasts, along with millions of dormant bacteria. A cubic mile of summer sky over North America will contain around 25 million assorted arthropods (such as aphids, flies, thrips, tiny wasps and spiders. The sky looks empty, but it's not. Our eyes are limited.

Much of the life in air is too small for us to see. These are the microscopic yeast and fungus spores and grains of pollen.

Every inch of Earth is filled with stories like the story of that desert frog. These stories are ready to tell themselves, if you are ready to listen.

Discussion: How can we each be a good listener and listen to Earth's stories?

- The first thing it takes is **Willingness**. To be willing you have to be open. Willing is what little kids are. Willing is what you were when you were little and saw the world with fresh, wide-open eyes. If you can re-awaken even a small part of those fresh little-kid eyes and re-capture your sense of the sheer wonder of the Earth, you will have all the willingness you need.

- Part of being willing is to wake up your sense of **wonder and curiosity**.

Then with your curiosity, **observe**. In science, you observe carefully—you Notice and you Note (record your observations).

- You have to decide not to be bored. Life is interesting, which is a good thing, because it is what we have.
- Artist/Naturalists are people who listen to Earth's stories and then celebrate those stories in art.

See Artist/Naturalists here:

http://morning-earth.org/Artist_Naturalists.html

Art-Making Possibilities

- **draw or paint** a scene from the story that was fun. Or one that was sad. Or one that expressed hope. Enter in Journal. Make a **skit** of that scene.
- Make a list of living things you have noticed in the air. Use the list to make a poem or story. Enter on Journal.
- **Write a story** of your own about something that happened in or near the pool in the desert. Other animals? Other seasons? Enter in Journal.
- **Creative dramatics:** Act out the desert pool from egg to tadpole to froglet. Include the sun as a character.