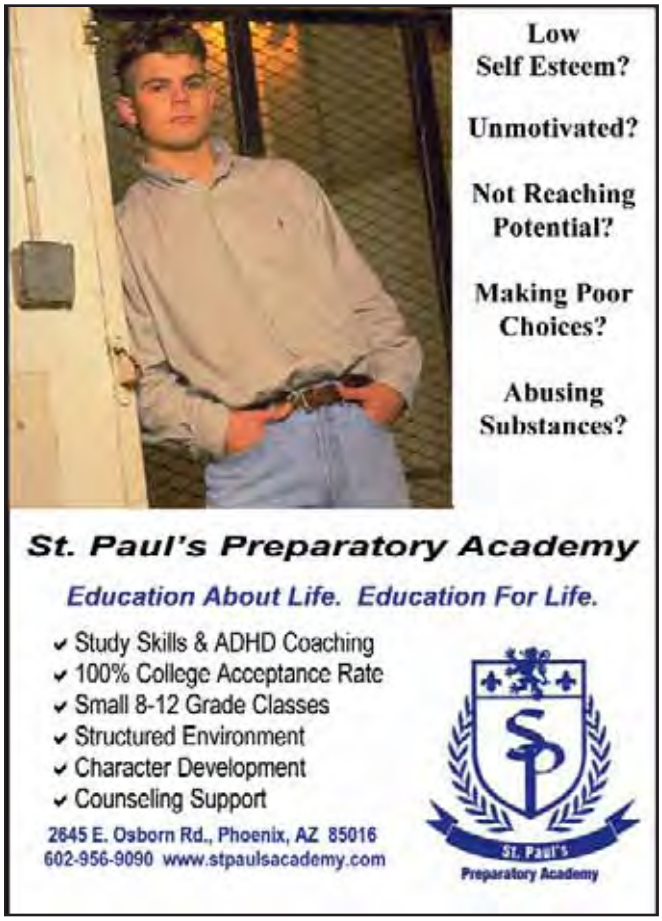




MEDICINE WHEEL AS A MANDALA FOR WHOLENESS

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My first introduction to medicine wheels was profound. I was in the wilderness of Montana with a small group of people on an advanced wilderness survival training. The instructor gave us a break from the grueling survival education and led us on a day hike across grassy fields under an immense blue sky. The destination was an ancient structure made from large stones on the top of a hill. The stones were placed side by side in a wheel formation that was probably fifty feet in diameter. There was a large boulder in the center, and stones reached in straight lines from this midpoint to the outer circle. The instructor excitedly pointed out how the wheel aligned with the four directions, and we gazed for miles from the stones indicating east, south, west and north. He further explained that the wheel was used by an ancient nature-based civilization for spiritual rituals. I felt an urge to move around the stones in quiet reverence, although I had no conscious reason for my actions. I imagined my steps aligning with the ancient beings that used this wheel for spiritual practice. It was a surreal experience.

Fast forward fifteen years and I'm now working as a therapist for a wilderness therapy program for young adults entitled *Medicine Wheel*. During this time I've studied counseling theories, Native American philosophy, Jungian concepts and eco-psychology. I've come a long way in understanding the symbol of the medicine wheel and its meaning of wholeness. Its roots go back through eons of time to the archetypal concept of the Mandala ("magic circle" in Hindu), a symmetrical arrangement of four parts around a midpoint. The circle represents cycles, and the quartered sections represent order and harmony. Carl Jung identified this symbol as a basic representation of the Self, self-awareness, balance and wholeness. He also taught how this symbol has shown up in cultures throughout time from lotus flowers in the Eastern world, to the stained glass rose designs in ancient European cathedrals, to the stone-sculpted medicine wheel that I experienced in Montana. The symbol suggests profound peace and healing (medicine) that comes from balancing the aspects that make up the individual, psyche, or spirit. It makes a powerful basis of recovery for my wilderness therapy students who are immersed in nature.

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the color black are associated with the west. It is an energy of shadows and darkness. It is a time of introspection and going within. It is associated with the human life cycle of maturity. From this place one can ask the question "Where did I come from?" One can also ask "What else do I need to change?"

North:

Cycling around to the north where winter dwells, there is an association of hibernation. It is a time of slipping deep into the abyss and preparing for a new journey. The color white is associated here, just as the hair of an elder turns white. This is the time after midnight, a dream time, a time of great healing. It is the time to be grounded deep within oneself. It is a time of understanding the wisdom that has been given and preparing for leadership. Here one might consider what is possessed that can be passed on to another, what can be given away.

Completing the Cycle:

Turning once again to the east to complete the cycle, one faces yet another opportunity to start over, this time with even more awareness and elevation. Rooted within more strongly, and more connected to the guiding force above, one can advance with confidence and knowledge. It is a never-ending cycle of change and self-improvement as one learns from experience and mistakes. And it is a cycle that one must keep going to stay balanced.

During the fifteen years since that day in Montana when I walked that prehistoric circle of stones, I've cycled through this process many times and in many ways. I'm honored now to lead the Medicine Wheel wilderness therapy students through their own path of direction and enlightenment using this mandalic concept.

Although the current curriculum that has been developed for the Medicine Wheel students does not actually use the traditional aboriginal aspects of the medicine wheel concept, it is used metaphorically. The overall six-direction structure of this ancient mandala is a pattern for life that is taught and used to create change. The curriculum has been strategically designed to highlight and examine areas of personal deficiency that are keeping the students from progressing forward, such as lack of self-discipline, drug abuse, self-defeating behaviors and family conflicts. Each week an outline of psychological (east), physical (south), social (west) and spiritual (north) assignments and tasks are used to challenge the students. Through successful completion of the tasks and the interpretation that the staff provides, there is the opportunity to turn the deficiencies into strengths. It is powerful medicine.

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***About the Author**: Deb Weir, PhD, LPC, a certified hypnotherapist and co-author of "Controlling That Wild Inner Child: The Secret to Love, Sex, and Intimacy" (2006), is the primary therapist for Medicine Wheel at RedCliff Ascent wilderness therapy program in Enterprise, UT. This is a rigorous, life-changing wilderness experience for adults age 18-25. For more information visit their website at www.rcmedicinewheel.com.*

We are a self-learning society, not a society that learns from its parents (as in the Agrarian Age) or from its schools (as in the Industrial Age).

~ Robert T. Kiyosaki

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