

The Training Academy of the Eschwege Institute

The "Four Shields" as an aid for a deeper self understanding

This model has been developed in the 1980´th by the American psychologists Steven Foster and his wife Meredith Little. For it they used rudiments of a traditional medicine wheel understanding of the Northern Cheyenne Nation, passed down by Hyemeyohsts Storm, as well as related rudiments, secondary literature and their own experiences.

In 1998 they published the results of their research in the book "THE FOUR SHIELDS: The Initiatory Seasons of Human Nature, Lost Borders Press, ISBN 0-9667659-0-7". It has been the accomplishment of Foster and Little, to translate the essence of archaic development models, so called medicine wheels, into a pan- or cross-cultural language of modern people and modern psychology.

In the work of Change Process and Vision Quest Guides, this model is functioning as an organizing principal that helps tracing the arc of "course-patterns" within change processes of any kind and to bring an understandable order into it.

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The Four Shields

Behind the metaphoric denomination "the Four Shields" hides a nature based model on the psychology of personal growth, which shows the principles of life and of biographical changes. The four shields represents the cycles of the seasons of life.

DEATH / BIRTH (= east / spring)

CHILDHOOD / PHISICALNESS / EMOTIONS (= south / summer)

PUBERTY / INTROSPECTION / ASSIMILATION (west / autumn)

ADULTHOOD / RESPONSIBILITY / AUTONOMY (north / winter)

And the cycle ends with **DEATH** = east/spring.

"Every beginning starts with an ending" T.S. Elliot

All the "Four Shields" throughout the seasons and the directions of a compass can be defined with more associations like, for example: birth / death= east / spring / letting go / creativity / spiritualism / inspiration.....

After a time of consideration one will be aware that the way the four seasons cycle and other procedures in nature work, is following the same principles as the four phases of a human life (birth, childhood, puberty, adulthood). That is why a development phase like puberty cannot be over leaped; just as summer cannot move into winter without first moving into autumn as it is a natural and needed life transition.

If there's an imbalance between the shields (imagine a listing raft) the opposite shield must be supported. To get there and support that shield we can't ignore the shield that is on the continued way. The way leads us through the themes of the shield that lies in between.

In this system you not only can look symbolically at the human development phases with their own tasks, it shows also the relationships and the transitions to each other and how to find a balance between them.

A journey through the wheel

Following the cycle of human development on the compass of the Four Shields, we start with being born, or passing the gate between in the east and the south.

Our childhood and actually the childhood of everything, is associated with the south, as well as the oldest part of our brain, our reptile brain. The major questions, we have to deal with are the following:

Where or how do I belong? Are my needs met and am I safe here?

Once we found answers to this, we can grow roots and blossoms. Like a caterpillar in the summer, we eat everything in, grow and grow, until fall comes and everything changes.

We grow a cocoon, a hard shell, as inside every form and contour dissolves into a living liquid, in which only our heart stays the same authentic core.

We have passed the gate between childhood and puberty, between south and west. The west is the place of questioning, of introspection and transformation. The west is the graveyard of old self-perceptions, in every process, independently from the biographically cycle, the west is the place where the old myth, of how something became and why it is as it is, must die. The leading questions here are the following:

Which old self-perception, must die, what old skin must be shed? Who am I now? What is my latest truth now? Am I able to stand my ground, even though, everybody will hate me?

Once we have passed through the "don't know land" of the west and we know again who we are and what our task will be, we have passed through the gate from the west to the north, from puberty / adolescence to young adulthood.

Here our leading questions are as follows:

How can I serve my people best? Does this serve me, my people and the higher good? What consequences will my action have for the next seven generations? Is everybody safe and provided with enough food? Do I walk my talk and do I mean what I say?

If our west-shield process has been good, we can stand our ground in the north, we protect our children and the elders, we feed them and do everything that is needed, to bring them all save through many winters, until we recognize that slowly younger adults take over. They start to ask us for advice and our life wisdom. Soon we know that our service for our people has reached another level and this has to do with letting go of responsibility.

Being able of letting go, opens a space for experiencing forces, bigger than us, wiser than us, holding, what we cannot hold anymore. Trust in these higher forces, in the intelligence of the universe is growing and as it grows, we learn to laugh about the serious attempts of the younger adults, to do everything the right way, to control, regulate and steer everything, just like we did, for so many years. We have become elders; partly we have left the north and have entered the east already. The leading questions in this last phase of our live, in the last phase of everything and every process, are as follows:

What is my current truth behind all my dogmatic concepts of how life should be? Who is the real person behind all his masks and perhaps irregular behavior and how good is his heart? What is this place, beyond wrong and write thinking? Where is my true home? Where does my longing go for? Who or what carries me, when I fall, what leads me, when I lead? Who is looking through my eyes and seems not getting older?

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As elders we are "ancestors in training", we fulfill an important role, as we can ease all the seriousness of the north with our paradox interventions and we can see the good heart in the young people beyond all layers of irregular behavior. We know, as we believe in them, they will believe in themselves.

Sooner or later we do the final step, our final sweat breath of air and we have passed even through the gate from north to east, the gate of death.

Where are we now? Or as for the beginning of our journey, where have we come from, before our birth? In the Four Shields, the east quality is the shield of the great mystery. As there are so many believes and different teachings about it, we respectfully simply call it the great mystery.

All one can really say about the qualities of the east, is that it has to do with letting go in whatever way, with trust, with allowing higher forces to come in for inspiration and support. All ideas, all beginnings, all paradox, unpredictable, not projectable and uncontrollable things have the quality of the east. Some of it is only possible, if we are willing to let go, some of it will force us to let go.

What for?

In times of tribal consciousness, the transition from one development phases of life to another has been celebrated with rituals to affirm the achievement of the new phase of life.

As a rudiment of a collective unconscious memory, one can still see this old ways in the self initiation attempts, from the west into the north that young people fail with so often.

That's why it is so important to understand how modern forms of rites of passage can facilitate and support the transition from one life season to the next.

The model of the Four Shields for example is useful to better understand the order of the relations and roles between youth, adults (parents or those in charge for the youth) and the "elders", respectively in our context the change process guides, who as mentors, locate their role predominantly in the east quality.

The model of the Four Shields is an easy- to - understand system which allows a deeper self- understanding and case-understanding. It represents a fundamental part of our work.

Every developmental or change process, has a south quality to it, followed by the uncertainty and aim for deeper understanding in the west, which then turns into a certain mature and structured direction, which again cannot stay forever, as the east will ask us to let it go again, to make space for the new.

If we can trace the arc of course-patterns within change processes of any kind, we can deeper understand a given situation and from there we will be able to design a sustainable support process around it.