

Notes on Mirroring and Advice to Mirrors

John Davis, Nancy Jane, Sherry Ellms, Jed Swift
Naropa University
Ecopsychology Intensive

*Thanks to Steven Foster and Meredith Little,
founders of the School of Lost Borders and our teachers.*

“Mirroring”: the elders turn a collective mirror to the person who is narrating the story. The mirror with which we are concerned is not the mirror in the bathroom or bedroom. It depicts far more than the physical proportions of the one looking into it. The mirror of the elder’s council is composed of the eyes and ears of the elders. The “impressions” which it reflects are emotional, psychological, rational, and spiritual, and have less to do with physical reality than personal reality. ... Their mirror is almost always “positive” as opposed to negative, for they know that their validation is the stuff of health and vitality. ... There is no therapeutic substitute for a body of empowering elders. I did not say “judging” or “examining”; I said “empowering.” The empowerment process is an art in itself.

Steven Foster with Meredith Little. (1998).
The Four Shields: The Initiatory Seasons of Human Nature.
Big Pine, CA: Lost Borders Press. www.lostborderspress.com/lbpress/

WHAT IS MIRRORING?

In mirroring, we listen to another’s story, and we reflect it back so that it will be more useful to narrators and so that they might come away empowered and more in touch with their depth.

Aims of Mirroring: To be a clear mirror to the other. To provide a reflection of the personal story that will reveal its inner nature and deeper meaning. To experience human nature deeply – body, psyche, mind, soul – and to respond to the four personae of human nature.

The essence of mirroring is deep listening and empowerment. Let your focus be more on listening; the reflection will come from that.

In mirroring, we hold the story up to the storyteller and ask, “Do you recognize this?” Story = teller’s experience. Story is microcosm of who person is, how s/he walks in the world. The hope is to have the teller reply, “Yes, of course, this is true, even though I never saw it before.”

KEY ELEMENTS

1. “If we cannot listen like a mirror, we cannot reflect back the wholeness of the body, soul, mind, and spirit of the teller.” (Steven Foster)
2. Nature is a mirror, and there is a nonduality between the context (e.g., nature), storyteller, and story. In mirroring, nothing is irrelevant either in the story or in the context in which it is told. In nature-based work, the context includes the natural world. Notice the wind, a sudden appearance of a bird or animal, the situation in which the story is being told. Include the environmental context; it may hold important clues about the story.
3. As a mirror, find the health, wisdom, strength, essence, and medicine in the story. Look for both challenges and resources evident in the story (tasks & gifts, wounds & medicine). Look for the dark, the shadow, and for the light. Nothing needs to be fixed or repaired. The most effective way is to empower the storyteller in the moment. Resist the temptation to get the storyteller to “the next step.” Don’t need to rescue the narrator. Empower!
4. Mirroring is “medicine,” i.e., both what the person needs in order to be healed, to be whole, and to grow, and what the person has to offer to the world. The word, medicine, comes from the Greek, “to guide.” Medicine is guidance. Medicine can be bitter and hard to swallow, even if it is healing. Good mirroring not only reveals the teller’s medicine; it is, itself, medicine.
5. Mirroring is also maieusis. This word comes from the Greek for “midwife.” So, as mirrors, we are midwifing the story and the narrator. The maieutic approach contrasts to the therapeutic approach. While therapy repairs what is broken, the maieutic facilitates a birth, a transformation, bringing forth into the world (and consciousness). What does mirroring bring forth? Wholeness, health, development, transformation, manifestation and expression in the world.
6. Reveal the story as a success story (e.g., even if the faster stayed out only 1 hr.) Be positive. Identifying a positive myth. What is a person yearning himself or herself into? What is the story that person is on earth to live out?
7. Mirroring is not regurgitation of the story. It is engagement with it.

ATTITUDE OF THE MIRROR

In our view, one’s attitude is at least as important as one’s technique.

1. It is a gift to witness. I fall in love with the storyteller and the story each time. It is a fun, intimate, personal, precious opening from one person to another. I imagine the teller opening her/his breastplate, reaching in, and offering the heart to be held by the circle and the mirror. This is true even if the story is veiled or protected.
2. Get the small self out of the way so the big Self can do the deep listening without judgment, manipulation, or bias. Avoid projection. Be clear where the reflection is coming from: yourself or the person’s story? Ask instead of interpreting, explaining, adding, or fixing. The

mirrors say how the story affects them, not what it “really means.” Drop your agenda. The more grounded the mirror is, the more intimacy there will be with the story and the narrator. There is an immediacy in the telling and in the reflection. Find this immediacy.

3. Get inside the story. Stories are seeds beginning to unfold. They are not over and done in first telling. Mirroring can soften the ground, fertilize, and nourish the story-seed. The storyteller knows best. Offer reflection to the storyteller, and let them take what they want. They will filter. Respect what doesn't fit for them as much as what does. Don't force your interpretation.
4. Cultivate an attitude of not-knowing. Hold open the possibility of seeing the story fresh, for the first time. Be willing to sit with your own confusion. Be willing to enter your own unknowing. This is a very powerful tool, impossible to over-emphasize. CF, Suzuki, “Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.” Keats called this negative capability, “that is when [a person] is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason...”
5. Mirroring is often like working with a dream. There is an element of an altered state of consciousness in mirroring. Mirrors need to be comfortable and experienced in such realms. Is it OK to drop your need to be in control, to know where the process is going, to be in charge? As in dream work, each element of the story may have meaning. Each element can reflect some part of the dreamer/teller. Help the teller identify with each element, “The X of me.”
6. Mirroring can be hard work. It can be like bare-handed hard-rock mining. It is humbling, daunting, frightening. Mirrors who go into mirroring with grandiosity of any kind are sure to get eaten alive at some point or worse, to go away empty. It can also lead to great fun, delight, intimacy, and fulfillment. However, going into mirroring in order to meet your own needs eventually backfires. So, we return to the guideline to get ourselves out of the way.

USEFUL TECHNIQUES FOR MIRRORING

These are very few rules to mirroring. Mirroring is sacred territory with its own dynamics and unfolding. These guidelines, derived from experience of what works and what doesn't, may be helpful. At the same time, there is no substitute for learning from experience.

1. Usually better to encourage the teller to focus on the actual details of the story while telling it, rather than going too quickly to meaning and symbolism. “What actually happened?”
2. The most pure mirroring: Repeat the story back without interpreting. Let the storyteller do any interpretation. At that point, the mirror disappears.
3. Avoid laying a conceptual framework on the story. The story has its own direction; find it. At the same time some conceptual frameworks, especially those shared between teller and mirror, can be useful to decode the images and experiences in the story.
4. Sometimes silence is the best reflection. Less is more. Trust the process, get out of the way. Be not afraid to keep thy mouth shut for a time.

5. Mirroring is often like working with a dream. There is an element of an altered state of consciousness in mirroring. Mirrors need to be comfortable and experienced in such realms. Is it OK to drop your need to be in control, to know where the process is going, to be in charge? As in dream work, each element of the story may have meaning. Each element can reflect some part of the dreamer/teller. Help the teller identify with each element, “The X of me.” For example, if a storm plays a prominent role in a story, ask about “the storm of you, your own storminess”; if a fly plays a starring role, what is “your inner fly?”
6. Mirror back what was happening in the natural world during the time the story was unfolding (e.g., a storm, a cold night, a brilliant dawn, animal life). Ask – don’t assume – what happened in the experience of the storyteller. Where is nature in the story?
7. Tend toward questions rather than declaratives. Be actively curious. When asking questions of storyteller, ask yourself, “Does this question really help the person, and the search to be in that story with them?” Let the storyteller amplify. “Do you want to say more about that?” “What do you know about that?” “Who came to you out there?” Who did the teller think about? Who was important?
8. Encourage the teller to live her/his questions. Don’t rob the storyteller of the gift of a question by giving an answer. Sometimes lots of detail is needed, sometimes only a seed or whiff.
9. Always look for windows into the soul of person. Adversity, engaged in a sincere and authentic way, deepens one’s contact with the soul and develops the soul. This is part of looking for the dark or difficult elements in the story. Shadows follow the body. To get in touch with shadow, go into body; their child, a passage to the shadow/west shield.
10. If you find yourself lost, bored, or spacing out, it may be you or it may be the story. Is the storyteller skimming the surface? Are you up against an edge of your own? What does the storyteller need; what do you need? The mirror may express this confusion to the teller or just sit with it. It’s OK to stop, go back to story, admit confusion, and regroup. (And in no case should the story-teller be made to feel judged for this confusion.)
11. Use Four Shields model. Is the story balanced in all four shields? What shields are missing or emphasized? Look for the child, the adolescent, the adult, and the dying/birthing one. Look for the body, the psyche, the mind, and the spirit.
12. Track the process, flow, change, transitions, inter-relationships, the ecotones of the psyche and spirit. “Life is always richer at the edges.”
13. Look for paradoxes, the elements which are surprising. Keep an eye out for elements which do not fit. What stands out in contrast to the rest of the story? Practice dialectics. Hold up opposites in the story so see what comes from their juxtaposition. Hold up the contrast between the initial intention and the events that unfolded.
14. Engage the power of myth. In myth, there is a surface story and a deep story. The more closely the surface reveals the depth, the more powerful the myth. In mirroring, we are

turning the person's story into a myth, or more accurately, we are revealing the mythic dimensions of one's story. Every event has its mythic dimensions. Good mirroring respects this. In the best mirroring, the narrator realizes this in her/his bones; s/he sees the story as a myth. Myth is the expression of ineffable archetypes into words and narrative, revealing the realer-than-real. In this sense, myth is not a dismissal, but a term of reverence. To support this, it is sometimes helpful to refer to familiar myths. The hero might bring a story of just having been thrown out of the Garden of Eden, faced a dragon in order to reclaim a lost gem, or like Red Riding Hood, seen a wolf in disguise. Such a reference, used judiciously when the time is right, can be very potent.

15. Polyocular mirroring (Steven Foster). Use the third person to tell the story back. This shifts the story to a more mythic dimension and helps to reveal the magnificence and power of the story. Often, it shifts the story from "yours" to "ours." This is a remarkably simple and powerful shift.
16. Explore the words themselves. Use word etymology, roots, word-ancestors. This is respecting and amplifying the language the storyteller uses. Use personal knowledge (yours and the teller's) of species, natural phenomena, etc. to *amplify* the story without interpreting.
17. Look for symbols to open up like eggs to see what is hatching. (But like an egg, be careful not to rush the process of hatching; better to incubate and encourage than to pry.) Symbol, from root "to connect" (CF, symbiosis, etc), Metaphor from root "to carry across." In metaphor, X is like (or as if) Y. In symbol (and ritual), X is also Y. Ritual and symbol open a unity or nonduality which is closer than metaphor.
18. "Yebo, madhlozi." In Zulu, Yes, ancestors; yes, spirit! Look for the ancestors. Put the story into a larger time context...past, future. How would this story have looked a hundred years ago? How will you look on this story in 20 or 100 years?
19. Best to do this with a partner. You can spell each other, complement each other, hold more pieces. Seek a balance of Masculine and Feminine energies. One way is to have a male and a female mirror working as a pair. Another way is to seek and embrace both the yin and the yang of mirroring.
20. Know when and what not to mirror. We cannot possibly mirror every element of the story. Sometimes it is effective to tell the narrator that you are intentionally not going to mirror certain elements of the story. Story has more in it than what was said. Encourage the narrator to own the story.
21. Let mirroring be pleasurable and joyful, as well as sincere work.

MIRRORING AS PATH

Mirroring can be seen as a contemplative practice. In addition to serving the story's narrator, the process of being a mirror and being a more refined mirror can be its own path to self-realization, maturation, and transparent engagement with one's depth, with others, and with the world. A few of the connections between mirroring and contemplative practice:

1. The key to mirroring is a way of being is deep listening and transparency.
2. Mirroring is based on immediate engagement, presence, and getting out of the way (transparency).
3. Mirroring calls for fearless offering, humility, and generosity with no attachment to outcomes.
4. Ultimately, there is a nonduality of story, storyteller, and mirror. One unfolding moment.

People of Orphalese, beauty is life when life unveils her holy face.
But you are life and you are the veil.
Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror.
But you are eternity and you are the mirror.

Kahlil Gibran. (1923). *The Prophet*. NY: Knopf.

READINGS

- Fox. (1999). When Someone Deeply Listens to You. *Circles On The Mountain*, number 10, page 13.
- Foster and Little. (1998). Do You Want Some Medicine? (chapter 3), *Roaring of the Sacred River*. Big Pine, CA: Lost Borders Press.
- Foster and Little. (1998). The Mirror of the Elders and The Shield Story. *The Four Shields: The Initiatory Seasons of Human Nature*. Big Pine, CA: Lost Borders Press. Pages 131-136.
- Loos. Sitting in Council: Working with Stories in Wilderness Rites of Passage. *Circles On The Mountain*, number 10, page 18-21.
- Stine (1999). Deep Listening. *Circles On The Mountain*, number 10, page 12.