

*Divination:  
The Search for Water, Spontaneity,  
and Self-Discovery*



These materials, including images, are copyright of the North Dakota Council on the Arts, 2017.

# Activity, Time and Materials

## ACTIVITY:

As a group, read water divination stories, discuss them, and then physically participate in divining for water. Activities coordinators, other staff, or volunteers can direct the activity plan.

## TIME:

Sixty to ninety minutes over one session.

## MATERIALS:

- 5 sealed bottles of water
- Beverages to be consumed by the participants
- Metal clothes hanger cut and shaped into two L-shaped divining rods, each at least 12" to 14" long
- Large photocopies of drought images (if possible, mounted on 25" x 30" display boards set on easels)
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

## **“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):**

The reading and conversation component of the plan is designed to increase social interaction between individuals within the care facility, thus addressing loneliness and boredom. The component of the plan that encourages the participants to try their hand at divining for water is designed to address both boredom and helplessness. Since the divination rods are held very loosely, many people with physical limitations will be able to participate—even people in wheelchairs. Some participants, whether skeptical or not, actually will be able to divine for water, while others will not. For those who are skeptical, the sense of discovery of a skill or “gift” they did not know they possess creates a sense of wonder, excitement, spontaneity, and humor for themselves and others.

### **ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:**

“In modern society, fierce competition and socioeconomic interaction stress the quality of life, causing a negative influence on a person’s mental health. Laughter is a positive sensation, and seems to be a useful and healthy way to overcome stress. Laughter therapy is a kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy that could make physical, psychological, and social relationships healthy, ultimately improving the quality of life. Laughter therapy, as a non-pharmacological, alternative treatment, has a positive effect on

mental health and the immune system. In addition, laughter therapy does not require specialized preparations, such as suitable facilities and equipment, and it is easily accessible and acceptable. For these reasons, the medical community has taken notice and attempted to include laughter therapy in more traditional therapies. Decreasing stress-making hormones found in the blood, laughter can mitigate the effects of stress. Laughter decreases serum levels of cortisol, epinephrine, growth hormone, and 3,4-dihydrophenylacetic acid (a major dopamine catabolite), indicating a reversal of the stress response. Depression is a disease, where neurotransmitters in the brain, such as norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin, are reduced, and there is something wrong in the mood control circuit of the brain. Laughter can alter dopamine and serotonin activity. Furthermore, endorphins secreted by laughter can help when people are uncomfortable or in a depressed mood. Laughter therapy is a noninvasive and non-pharmacological alternative treatment for stress and depression, representative [causes] that have a negative influence on mental health. In conclusion, laughter therapy is effective and scientifically supported as a single or adjuvant therapy.” [Abstract]

*--Yim, J. “Therapeutic Benefits of Laughter in Mental Health: A Theoretical Review.” *Tohoku Journal of Experimental Medicine* 239, no. 3 (2016): 243-249.*

*Cover photo: Gerald Geist, of Devils Lake, ND, with L-shaped metal divination rods. Note how the rods are held and shaped. The rods should be shaped like the letter L, with about 1 ½" to 2" of the long end tipped down. (Image courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)*

# Activity Plan

## SESSION 1 (60 TO 90 MINUTES):

1. Beverages appropriate to the time of day and season in which the activity plan is conducted should be provided to each participant at the beginning of the session. The beverage, whether it is water, hot apple cider, tea, or coffee, is to be consumed and enjoyed during the activity.
2. The person leading this activity should introduce the subject of water divination by asking those in attendance if they are familiar with the tradition. Then read the folklore examples on page 142 of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*.
3. To participants, distribute large photocopies of the drought images on page 143 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Or, if possible, display large photocopies of those images mounted on 25" x 30" display boards set on easels and placed in different parts of the room to make it easier for everyone to see them. The person directing this activity should read the text on page 143, including the captions, while pointing out the associated images.
4. The person directing this activity then should read the text and show the images from pages 144 and 145 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Engage the participants in conversation afterwards by asking a series of questions, such as:
  - Has anyone here heard of this tradition before? What have you heard and what do you know about it?
  - Has anyone here divined for water before or know someone who does or did it? If so, can you tell us about it? What did they use; metal rods or metal bars or willow twigs? (Ask questions in such a way as to engage and encourage the group in conversation, not just a question and answer exchange.)
  - Do you think it works? How or why do you think it works? Can anyone here do it?
5. If one of the participants has shared that they have divined for water or have this ability, ask him or her to demonstrate with the metal L-shaped rods. Place sealed bottles of water on the floor in various locations. Have that person slowly walk over the bottles of water to see how the divining rods react. If people disbelieve, ask if the person would do it again, only this time with his or her eyes closed or blindfolded while activities coordinators walk beside and guide the person, so no one trips, falls, or bumps into anything. If the person demonstrating is in a wheelchair, have the participant hold the divining rods while a staff person slowly pushes the wheelchair over the bottles of water.
6. With an open mind and with good-natured encouragement and humor, encourage other participants, including those who are skeptical and those in wheelchairs, to try their hand at divining for



water. Use the same process with the bottled water as described above. Try placing the bottles in different patterns for different attempts at divination. Using a long hallway or big room is recommended. Water lines in the facility and on the facility grounds also can be detected using divination rods. Facilities or janitorial staff may be able to identify water line locations so that participants can explore those areas with divination rods. Provide general instructions on how to hold the metal L-shaped rods and explain how the rods should react. (For a visual illustration of how the L-shaped rods should be shaped from metal coat hangers and how they should be held, refer to the images on page 145 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, as well as the accompanying image in this activity plan.)

- Instructions: Put one rod in each hand. It is important to hold each rod very loosely, so they just sit in the crook of the knuckles and can move easily, freely, and unobstructed. Do not grip the rods, as they should swing freely. Place the thumb alongside the index finger, so the rods are not blocked by the thumb when the rods move. With your elbows at your side and your forearms parallel in front of you, loosely hold the rods parallel to each other. Keep one arm slightly higher than the other, so that when the rods begin to move they will not bump into each other. Slowly start walking towards the bottles of water on the floor. As you approach the water, the rods will begin to move. The closer you come to the water, the more the rods will move. The rods will move inward, forming an X, when directly above the source of water. (For some people, the rods will move in the opposite direction—

moving outward as the source of water is approached.) As you pass over and away from the water source, the rods slowly will return to their original parallel position. This will happen at each source (bottle) of water.

**Important Note:** It is important to space the bottles of water far enough apart to allow the rods to move from the starting parallel position, to the cross position (or outward position), back to the parallel position again, before the next source of water is approached. This distance can vary, but try at least ten to twelve feet between bottles of water.

**Explanatory Comments:** Activities are enriched when multiple senses are engaged. Different people process information in different ways, and, by stimulating multiple senses in various components of the activity plan, more people are better and more fully engaged. It is in this way that providing beverages for consumption in association with a water divination activity plan stimulates the senses of taste, smell, and touch. The use of large photocopies of images stimulates the sense of sight, especially for those individuals who may have sight impairments. Holding the metal rods and walking provides physical touch, movement, and exercise. Similarly, discussion helps to stimulate the sense of hearing. It is through all these various means that information is received through multiple senses, making the experience that much more engaging.



*Gerald Geist, of Devils Lake, ND, with L-shaped metal divination rods. Note how the rods are held and shaped. The rods should be shaped like the letter L, with about 1 ½" to 2" of the long end tipped down. (Image courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)*

### **AUTHOR • TROYD GEIST:**

Troyd is the state folklorist with the North Dakota Council on the Arts who is charged with encouraging the preservation and continuation of folk and traditional arts, heritage, and culture. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Sociology/Anthropology from North Dakota State University, and has participated in and conducted projects involving the impact of folk art and folk traditions on personal health and well-being. Those efforts include traditional storytellers working with fetal alcohol research and prevention programs, Bell's palsy as viewed and treated in traditional cultures, familial Alzheimer's disease tracking using anthropological methods, and the use of culturally infused narrative and traditional music for guided imagery. He directed the original *Art for Life* pilot project in 2001-2003, which measured the effects of long-term folk arts and artist interaction on combating the negative impact of the "Three Plagues" (loneliness, boredom, and helplessness) that many residents in elder care facilities experience. Subsequently, he developed the *Art for Life Program*. With Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, Troyd co-edited, co-compiled, and co-authored the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*.