

**ANTHROPOLOGY OUTREACH OFFICE
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION**

Submitted by Ann Kaupp

TEACHING ACTIVITY

Instructions for North American Myths and Legends

1. Divide the class into six groups and assign each group one story. Each group chooses a leader.
2. Members of each group read the story silently taking notes on details which reflect: a) the natural environment; b) the relationship between the human and nonhuman world; c) explanations of natural phenomena; d) values of the society; e) special roles within the society f) view of the supernatural.
3. Each group discusses its myth for 10 minutes using the above categories as a guide.
4. Whole class convenes. Each group leader reads his/her story aloud and summarizes the group's ideas about the story. The classroom teacher can add other relevant details to more fully illuminate meaning and significance of the story.
5. Optional: Teacher might end the activity by reading the King James version of Genesis to illustrate all peoples have creation stories to explain origins. Also that the Judeo-Christian tradition has parallels to other stories such as the Earthmaker. These parallels should provide interesting class discussion.

NATIVE AMERICAN MYTHS AND LEGENDS

CREATION STORY (Netsilik Eskimos-Canada)

In the earliest times on earth, there were no animals in the sea. People did not need blubber for fires, because newly drifted snow would burn. Great forests grew on the bottom of the sea. From them came the pieces of driftwood that still wash up on our shores. In those days, there was no ice on the sea. This is a distant memory of the time when the first people lived on the earth.

Everything was in darkness then. The lands and the animals could not be seen. Both men and animals lived on earth, but there was no difference between them. Men could become animals and animals could become men, and they all spoke the same language.

In the very earliest times, men were not as good as hunters are today, and their weapons were few. So they had little food, and sometimes they had to eat the earth itself. Everything came from the ground, and people lived on the ground. They did not have all the rules to follow that we do today. There were no dangers to threaten them, but there were no pleasures either.

That was the time when magic words were made. Suddenly a word would become powerful and could make things happen, and no one could explain why. It was always dark until once a hare and a fox had a talk. "Darkness, darkness," said the fox. He wanted to steal from caches in the darkness. "Day, day," said the hare. He wanted the light of day so he could find a place to feed. And suddenly day came, for the hare's words were more powerful than the fox's. Day came, and was replaced by night, and when night had gone, day came again.

In those early times there were only men and no women. There is an old story that tells how women came from men. One time the world collapsed and was destroyed, and great showers of rain flooded the land. All the animals died, and the world was empty. Then two men grew up out of the earth. They married, for there was no one else, and one man sang a song to become a woman. After a while they had a child, and they were the first family.

In those early ages, women often could not have children so the earth had to help. Women went out searching for children who had grown up out of the earth. A long search was needed to find boys, but there was no need to go far to find girls. This is the way the earth gave children to the first people, and in that way they became many.

(Knud Rasmussen, compiler. *This World We Know: Beliefs and Traditions of the Netsilik Eskimo*. Education Development Center, 1967.)

THE SHAMAN IN THE MOON (Bering Sea Eskimos-Alaska)

A Malamut shaman from Kotzebue Sound near Selawik Lake told me that a great chief lives in the moon who is visited now and then by shamans who always go to him two at a time, as one man is ashamed to go alone. In the moon live all kinds of animals that are on the earth, and when any animal becomes scarce

here the shamans go up to the chief in the moon and, if he is pleased with the offerings that have been made to him, he gives them one of the animals that they wish for, and they bring it down to the earth and turn it loose, after which its kind becomes numerous again.

The shaman who told me the foregoing said he had never been to the moon himself, but he knew a shaman who had been there. He had been up only as high as the sky, and went up that high by flying like a bird and found that the sky was a land like the earth, only that the grass grew hanging downward and was filled with snow. When the wind blows up there it rustles the grass stems, loosening particles of snow which fall down to the earth as a snowstorm.

When he was up near the sky he saw a great many small, round lakes in the grass, and these shine at night to make the stars. The Malemut of Kotzebue Sound also say that the north wind is the breath of a giant, and when the snow falls it is because he is building himself a snow house and the particles are flying from his snow shovel. The south wind is the breath of a woman living in the warm southland.

(Edward W. Nelson, "The Eskimo About Bering Strait," *Smithsonian Institution 18th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Wash., D.C., 1900.)

HOW THE SUN CAME (Cherokee)

There was no light anywhere, and the animal people stumbled around in the darkness. Whenever one bumped into another, he would say, "What we need in the world is light." And the other would reply, "Yes, indeed, light is what we badly need."

At last the animals called a meeting and gathered together as well as they could in the dark. The red-headed woodpecker said, "I have heard that over on the other side of the world there are people who have light."

"Good, good!" said everyone.

"Perhaps if we go over there, they will give us some light," the woodpecker suggested.

"If they have all the light there is," the fox said, "they must be greedy people, who would not want to give any of it up. Maybe we should just go over there and take the light from them."

"Who shall go?" cried everyone, and the animals all began talking at once, arguing about who was the strongest and ran fastest, who was best able to go and get the light.

Finally the 'possum said, "I can try. I have a fine big bushy tail, and I can hide the light inside my fur."

"Good! Good!" said all the others, and the 'possum set out.

As he traveled eastward, the light began to grow and grow, until it dazzled his eyes, and the 'possum screwed his eyes up to keep out the bright light. Even today, if you notice, you will see that the 'possum's eyes are almost shut, and that he comes out of his house only at night.

All the same, the 'possum kept going, clear to the other side of the world, and there he found the sun. He snatched a little piece of it and hid it in the fur of his fine bushy tail, but the sun was so hot it burned off all of the fur, and by the time the 'possum got home his tail was as bare as it is today.

"Oh, dear!" everyone said. "Our brother has lost his fine bushy tail, and still we have no light."
"I'll go," said the buzzard. "I have a better sense than to put the sun on my tail. I'll put it on my head."

So the buzzard traveled eastward till he came to the place where the sun was. And because the buzzard flies so high, the sun-keeping people did not see him, although now they were watching out for thieves. The buzzard dived straight down out of the sky, the way he does today, and caught a piece of the sun in his claws. He set the sun on his head and started for home, but the sun was so hot that it burned off all his head feathers, and that is why the buzzard's head is bald today.

Now the people were in despair. "What shall we do? What shall we do?" they cried. "Our brothers have tried hard; they have done their best, everything a man can do. What else shall we do so we can have light?"

They have to the best a man can do," said a small voice from the grass, "but perhaps this is something a woman can do better than a man."

"Who are you?" everyone asked. "Who is that speaking in a tiny voice and hidden in the grass?"
"I am your Grandmother Spider," she replied. "Perhaps I was put in the world to bring you light. Who knows? At least I can try, and if I am burned up it will still not be as if you had lost one of your great warriors."

Then Grandmother Spider felt around her in the darkness until she found some damp clay. She rolled it in her hands, and molded a little clay bowl. She started eastward, carrying her bowl, and spinning a thread behind her so she could find her way back.

She reached out gently, and took a tiny bit of the sun, and placed it in her clay bowl. Then she went back along the thread that she had spun, with the sun's light growing and spreading before her, as she moved from east to west. And if you will notice, even today a spider's web is shaped like the sun's disk and its rays, and the spider will always spin her web in the morning, very early, before the sun is fully up.

"Thank you Grandmother," the people said when she returned. "We will always honor you and we will always remember you."

And from then on pottery making became woman's work, and all pottery must be dried slowly in the shade before it is put in the heat of the firing oven, just as Grandmother Spider's bowl dried in her hand slowly, in the darkness, as she traveled toward the land of the sun.

(Alice Marriott and Carol K. Rachlin. *American Indian Mythology*.
Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1968.)

CREATION OF THE ANIMAL PEOPLE (Okanogan - S.W. Oregon)

The earth was once a human being. Old-One made her out of a woman. "You will be the mother of all people," he said.

Earth is alive yet, but she has been changed. The soil is her flesh; the rocks are her bones; the wind is her breath; trees and grass are her hair. She lives spread out, and we live on her. When she moves, we have

an earthquake.

After changing her to earth, Old-One took some of her flesh and rolled it into balls, as people do with mud or clay. These balls Old-One made into the beings of the early world. They were the ancients. They were people, and yet they were at the same time animals.

In form, some of them were like the animals; some were more like people. Some could fly like birds; others could swim like fishes. In some ways the land creatures acted like animals. All had the gift of speech. They had greater powers and were more cunning than either animals or people. And yet they were very stupid in some ways. They knew that they had to hunt in order to live, but they did not know which beings were deer and which were people. They thought people were deer and often ate them.

Some people lived on the earth at that time. They were like the Indians of today except that they were ignorant. Deer also were on the earth at that time. They were real animals then too. They were never people or ancient animal people, as were the ancestors of most animals. Some people say that elk, antelope and buffalo also were always animals, to be hunted as deer are hunted. Others tell stories about them as if they were ancients of half-human beings.

The last balls of mud Old-One made were almost all alike and were different from the first ones he made. He rolled them over and over. He shaped them like Indians. He blew on them and they became alive. Old-One called them men. They were Indians, but they were very ignorant. They did not know how to do things. They were the most helpless of all creatures Old-One made. Some of the animal people preyed on them and ate them.

Old-One made both male and female people and animals, so that they might breed and multiply. Thus all living things came from the earth. When we looked around, we see everywhere parts of our mother.

Most of the ancient animal people were selfish, and there was much trouble among them. At last Old-One said, "There will soon be no people if I let things go on like this."

So he sent Coyote to kill all the monsters and other evil beings. Old-One told Coyote to teach the Indians the best way to do things and the best way to make things. Life would be easier and better for them when they were no longer ignorant. Coyote then traveled on the earth and did many wonderful things.

(Ella E. Clark. *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*.
Univ. of California Press, 1953.)

HOW COYOTE GOT HIS SPECIAL POWER (Okanogan - S.W. Oregon)

In the beginning of the world, Spirit Chief called a meeting of all the animal people. "Some of you do not have names yet," he said when they had gathered together. "And some of you do not like the names you have now. Tomorrow, before the sun rises I will give a name to everyone. And I will give each an arrow also."

"Come to my lodge as soon as the darkness is gone. The one who gets there first may choose the name he wants and I will give him the longest arrow. The longest arrow will mean that he will have the most power."

As the people left the meeting, Coyote said to his friend Fox, "I'm going to be there first. I don't like my name. I want to be called Grizzly Bear or Eagle."

Fox laughed. "No one wants your name. You may have to keep it."

"I'll be there first," repeated Coyote. "I won't go to sleep tonight."

That night he sat by his fire and stayed awake for a long time. Owl hooted at him. Frog croaked in the marshes. Coyote heard them all. But after the stars had closed their eyes, he became very sleepy. His eyelids grew heavy. "I will have to prop my eyes open." So he took two small sticks and propped his eyelids apart. "Now I can stay awake."

But soon he was fast asleep, and when he awoke, the sun was making shadows. His eyes were dry from being propped open, but he ran to the lodge of the Spirit Chief.

"I want to be Grizzly," he said, thinking he was the first one there. The lodge was empty except for Spirit Chief.

"That name is taken, and Grizzly Bear has the longest arrow. He will be chief of the animals on the earth."

"Then I will be Eagle."

"That name is taken, and Eagle has the second arrow. Eagle will be the chief of the birds."

"Then I will be Salmon."

That name is taken, and Salmon has the third arrow. Salmon will be the chief of all the fish. Only the shortest arrow is left, and only one name--Coyote."

And the Spirit Chief gave Coyote the shortest arrow. Coyote sank down beside the fire of the Spirit Chief. His eyes were still dry. The Spirit Chief felt sorry and put water in his eyes. Then Coyote had an idea.

"I will ask Grizzly Bear to change with me."

"No," said Grizzly, "I cannot. Spirit Chief gave my name to me."

Coyote came back and sank down again beside the fire in the big lodge. Then Spirit Chief spoke to him.

"I have special power for you. I wanted you to be the last one to come. I have work for you to do, and you will need this special power. With it you can change yourself into any form. When you need help, call on your power."

"Fox will be your brother. He will help you when you need help. If you die, he will have power to bring you to life again."

"Go to the lake and get four tules. Your power is in the tules. Then do well the work I will give you to do." So that is how Coyote got his special power.

(Ella E. Clark. *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*.
Univ. of California Press, 1953.)

WINNEBAGO INDIAN CREATION STORY

In the beginning Earthmaker was alone. Earthmaker was sitting in space when he came to consciousness. Nothing was to be found anywhere. He began to think of what he was to do and finally he cried. Tears flowed from his eyes and fell below where he was sitting. After a while he looked below and saw something bright. The bright objects were tears, of which he had not been aware and, which falling below, had formed the present waters. They became the seas of today.

Then Earthmaker began to think again. He thought, "Thus it is whenever I wish anything. Everything will become the water of the seas." So he wished for light and it became light. Then he thought, "It is as I have supposed; the things that I wished for, come into existence as I desired." Then he again thought and wished for this earth and the earth came into existence. Earthmaker looked at the earth and he liked it, but it was not quiet. It moved about as do the waves of the sea. Then he made the trees and he saw that they were good. But even these did not make the earth quiet. It was however almost quiet. Then he created the four cardinal points and the four winds. At the four corners of the earth he placed them as four great and powerful spirits, to act as weights holding down this island earth of ours. Yet still the earth was not quiet. Then he made four large beings and threw them down toward the earth and they were pierced through the earth with their heads eastward. They were really snake-beings. Then it was that the earth became still and quiet. Now he looked upon the earth and he liked it.

Again he thought of how things came into existence as he desired. So he spoke: "I shall make a man like myself in appearance." So he took a piece of earth and made it like himself. Then he talked to what he had created but it did not answer. He looked at it again and saw it had no mind or thought. So he made a mind for it. But again it did not answer. Then he made it a tongue. Then he talked to it again but it did not answer. So he looked at it and he saw that it had no soul. So he made it a soul. He talked to it again and then it very nearly said something but could not make itself intelligible. So Earthmaker breathed into his mouth and talked to it and it answered.