

RESPECT – RE/CREATION STORIES

HAUDENOSAUNEE – SKY WOMAN⁹

The Creation Story is the story that impacts our people and our concepts of the world perhaps more than any Iroquois realizes. It begins in a place called Karonhià:ke: the place in the sky. It is the name of that planet or that earth that we came from before we were on this earth. In this world somewhere in the solar system were our people, our ancestors.

This lady from the sky is Atsi'tsiakà: the matured flower. And in this world, there was this tree. And it was dark there. There was no sun over there in that solar system or wherever they were in that part of the Sky World. This tree grew in the middle. And here in this world of Karonhià:ke, this tree had everything growing on it. It had apples, it had peaches, it had plums, it had cherries, it had pears, it had everything you can think of in terms of fruit. Since this tree grew everything, it had a power. They called it the Life Tree because it produced the thing that made everything live. They talked about this tree being such a powerful life-giving source that it glowed. It had a radiance to it. And in that world where there was not sun, it was that tree whose glow gave them some light in the darkness.

And they were told, whatever is on that tree, whatever grows on there, is for the people. But you cannot do anything with that tree: you cannot climb on that tree; you cannot swing on that tree; nor can you go there and pull the peaches, the apricots or the pears off of it. It is for you, the people and the animals and the birds. But you have to wait until the pear finishes ripening and it falls to the ground. Then you can go get

it. Once the peaches come off, they are yours. But you cannot go over there and pick them because they might not be ready. Nobody can climb there because they might break the branches. And then it will interfere with the energy and the source of the power for the world. That is the teaching.

Now this woman got pregnant. Being pregnant there is the same as being pregnant today. When a woman gets pregnant, a new life begins to form in her body. And all the thousands of connections – mechanisms of the brain and things that cause you to be able to move, to see, to understand, to perceive things – all hook to this new baby to give it the same. And so it effects changes in the woman who is going through this, radical changes.

So sometimes she is in a good mood, a happy mood. And then the next minute or the next half hour, she is ready to cut your head off. A minute later she wants to do something. It is impossible to do that, but she is convinced she is going to. There are mood swings going on in her because this new human being is taking those powers and touching those nerves. That is what causes this erratic, moody behaviour.

And so this pregnant woman in the Sky World says to her husband, "In the middle of where we live, there is that tree. And I would have no greater pleasure, my husband, than if you were to go over to that tree, and get some of its small tender fresh roots, and its bark, its skin. Make a tea for me to drink. I would be so satisfied, and I would have such great peace."

⁹ Pg. 40-53 in *And Grandma Said...Iroquois Teachings as passed down through the oral tradition* by Tom Porter, published by Xlibris, 2008.

And her husband says to her, "Did you forget that we are not supposed to touch that tree?"

And she says, "Doggone it! Get over there and do what I said, instead of talking about stuff like that."

And of course he jumped. He got over there where the big tree was, the beautiful big tree with all of its fruit. He looked at the tree, and he was still reluctant. He did not want to do it. But he was in a dilemma. So he looked at that tree, and he went a little bit closer, but he did not touch it. He looked. And right close to the base of the tree, there was a hole that appeared from nowhere, from nothing. It just appeared. And he looked at that. And "Geez", he says, "you cannot see the bottom of it." And he was not going to get any closer. That is enough, he thought. It was enough for him. And he backed off. So he went back home.

And she says, "You got that medicine or that root?"

And he says, "I could not do it."

And she hollers at him, "What is wrong with you?" She says, "I should have known not to send you over there. You got no backbone. You got no courage. You're lazy." She said that to him, made him feel bad. She wouldn't give him a chance to explain anything either. And she says, "Get out of the way. I'll go do it. I should have done it myself in the first place."

And so she went over there after scolding and making him feel like nothing. She didn't even give him a chance to finish talking. She went over there because she didn't believe him, and she saw that hole in the ground next to the tree. She said, "Gee, that's true, what he said. I wonder what did that?" She went closer

and she looked at the hole. "Gee, I can't even see how far down it is." So she got on her hands and knees and she put her nose right to it and looked at it really hard. And that was not enough. This time she stuck her head in there. And she said, "Wow. I've never seen that before."

Anyway, as she was busy investigating around in that hole, she did not notice that the grains of dirt were falling. And by this time, the hole was getting bigger. The next thing you know she started to fall. Once she realized that she was falling, she started frantically trying to grab anything she could reach. And they say, because this was the Tree of Life, there were all kinds of seeds, things that fell around those roots onto the ground below, at the base of the tree. And as she tried to avoid falling, she grabbed the strawberry plant that was growing there. And she grabbed peach seeds, cherry seeds, and different kinds of seeds in her hands.

And she began to fall down through the sky, through the atmosphere, tumbling, head over heels. And as she was falling down, you have to remember that on this earth where we live, there was no land – no mountains, no valleys. The complete planet was surrounded by water. There was no land anywhere. The only ones that lived here were turtles, fish, beavers, otters, ducks, geese, and herons. And all these creatures had webbed toes and fingers in order to survive in the water. But deer did not live here or any of those kinds of things that did not have webbed feet.

As she came falling down there was a flock of water birds who looked up. And they said, "What is that coming down here?" They had never seen such a



creature. They did not know what it was. So they flew over close to where she was falling and they examined her. They looked at her skin, and they noticed it was not like the skin they had for water. And they looked at her toes and fingers and they noticed there was nothing between them; they were not webbed to help her swim. So they gathered that she was not from their world – the world of water. And if she was going there, she would not survive.

They felt sorry for her, and they tried to intervene. So what they said was "Let's all fly together. We'll hook our wings together and make a soft feathery place so she can gently fall on our bodies. We'll catch her. Then she won't get hurt. And we'll try to take her back where she came from because we don't think she can survive in this water where we live."



So they caught her gently on their feathery backs, and they began to go in an orchestrated way. They flew her way up high, as far as they could go. Pretty soon they became totally exhausted. They just did not have the energy to go any farther up. And they came to the realization that they just could not get her back up there. It was too far, too high. They had run out of power.

So they said quickly in their little council of birds, "Well, we'll have to take her to where we live. We don't know what we're going to do when we get there, though. She's in trouble. We can't fix that. But that's the only choice we've got, so we better find something to help us." And one of them said, "You go down first. Dive down there and tell all the different life in the water that there is a great emergency. Tell them what is happening. Maybe together they can find a way to think of a plan to help this being." One dove down as fast as he could. When he got near the water he began to scream at the top of his lungs. And he got the attention of all the different animals that were in the

water. They all came over. So he said, "Something has happened to us. We've never seen it before. Some kind of strange creature is falling from the sky. We don't know where she came from. Somewhere up there. And we caught her, and we saved her. Now we have to bring her down here because we couldn't take her back up where she came from. But she doesn't have anything like us to survive in the water world. So how will she survive? Maybe she's going to drown on us, die, whatever."

All the animals of the water world had a meeting. And they did not know what to do at all. They were completely befuddled about it. Just as they were ready to quit, since they did not have any options, finally the big turtle spoke up. And that turtle said, "I don't really have an answer, either. But I might have a temporary answer. How about if when they get down here, you tell them to put that creature right in the middle of my back. I'll stay afloat up on top of the water, and I'll hold



her up. And then we can try to keep thinking about what we might do to help her.”

So when they got down, they put here on that turtle. And she stood there. And all the animals came from every direction, of all sizes and shapes and forms. They were all nosy; they were all curious to see what this creature was, this monster, or whatever it was. And they looked at her. And they came to the same conclusion as the birds did – that she had to have land so she would not drown in the water.

And then she opened up her hands. She showed them that she had a strawberry plant. She had all those seeds in her hand, which were to be her food source. But there was no dirt to plant them. So the beaver said, “Dirt. I think I remember my grandfather and great-grandfathers talking one time when I as just a young kid. I heard that below this big water somewhere, way down, there is dirt down there. But we’ve never seen it. We’ve never been down there.”

Then the otter said, “I seem to have heard that too, from our grandpa, and elders. They said that there was dirt.” And they all came to the same conclusion. They had heard it. But none of them had ever been there. So finally the beaver said, “Well, I have a big tail, you know. And it can push me, and I can go fast, and I’m a good swimmer. And I can hold my breath a long time. I could go and try to retrieve that dirt. And if I do, then I’ll bring it for her, and she can plant those seeds, and she will have food.”

So he took a run and a jump and he dove. He splashed into the water, and down he went. And he was gone a long time. And all of a sudden, his body popped out of the water. And everybody saw him. He was lifeless. He was not moving at all. It appeared that he had drowned; he had died. And so they pulled his body up there. And sure enough, he had drowned. He had never made it to the bottom of the big water.

So then the otter tried it. And then different ones tried it. They all took turns, but they all died. Finally,



a little tiny one, the smallest one – the muskrat – he came forward. He does not have anything to help him to be great. He is just a little tiny scroungy thing, not like the beaver, not like the otter with their streamlined bodies that make them swift as an arrow. He is just a scroungy little old muskrat. But all the other creatures had tried it, and they could not do it, so now he was their last chance. So they were all looking at him. And if there was a place to hide, I suppose he would have hid. But there was no place. So he felt he had to be brave; he had to do his share. He said, “Well, I’m not a good swimmer. I don’t have a big tail like the beaver to propel me down in the water. All I am is just a little old muskrat. And if they didn’t make it, probably I’m not going to make it either. But at least I’m going to try.”

So they said okay. And so he ran along on top of that turtle’s back. And he jumped and he dove in and down he went. He was gone longer than every one of those animals. All of a sudden, his little old scroungy body came popping up on top. His eyes were closed. And there was no movement in his body whatsoever. And he, it appeared, had gone as well. He did not make it.

So the other animals, they went over there and grabbed him. They dragged him up on top of the turtle’s back to examine him, to see if he was dead. They touched him all over, and he was cold as ice. But finally when they touched around his chest, they felt a little warmth and a little movement. A movement so faint...but he was living. So they pushed on his stomach, and water came up. And they pushed on his stomach, and more water came up. As they revived

him, his eyes opened up, and he started to blink. And when they opened his little tiny black hand, there were some little granules of the dirt there, from the big water. And not only there, but in his little tiny mouth there was some more of that dirt.

And so when he came to, he went over there to that woman and he gave it to her, that dirt. Everybody was happy. All the animals were so elated, so joyous, because they were able to do it in their combined efforts, through great sacrifice. Life could begin. And so the woman took the dirt. And she put it right there in the middle of the turtle’s back. And then she started a kind of sideways shuffle walk in a circle where that dirt was in the middle. And as she started to move she started chanting the language of Karonhià:ke, for that’s where she was from.

And as she went around there, the miracle of birth began. And the granules of dirt began to multiply and grow. Instead of a little speckle, it had become a pile. And as she continued to sing or to chant that song, it began to multiply even more. And not only that, but the turtle began to grow in accordance with the growth of that dirt. And as she continued to go around in an even bigger circle, the turtle grew and grew until it became bigger. And there was wall-to-wall dirt covering it now. That was the miracle of birth.

So this turtle got bigger and bigger until it became what they call Turtle Island. That is why the Lakota, the Blackfoot, the Mohawks, most all of the original people, when they refer to the earth, call it Turtle Island. That is what we call this earth where we live. And it came from this story.