

The Creation Story – Turtle Island

For the Ojibway/Anishinabe people, the legend is as follows. Long ago, after the Great Mystery, or Kitchi-Manitou, first peopled the earth, the Anishinabe, or Original People, strayed from their harmonious ways and began to argue and fight with one another. Brother turned against brother and soon the Anishinabe were killing one another over hunting grounds and others disagreements. Seeing that harmony, brotherhood, sisterhood, and respect for all living things no longer prevailed on Earth, Kitchi-Manitou decided to purify the Earth. He did this with water.

The water came in the form of a great flood, or mush-ko'-be-wun', upon the Earth destroying the Anishinabe people and most of the animals as well. Only Nanaboozhoo, the central figure in many of the Anishinabe oral traditions, was able to survive the flood, along with a few animals and birds who managed to swim and fly. Nanaboozhoo floated on a huge log searching for land, but none was to be found as the Earth was now covered by the great flood. Nanaboozhoo allowed the remaining animals and birds to take turns resting on the log as well. Finally, Nanaboozhoo spoke.

"I am going to do something," he said. "I am going to swim to the bottom of this water and grab a handful of earth. With this small bit of Earth, I believe we can create a new land for us to live on with the help of the Four Winds and Kitchi-Manitou."

So Nanaboozhoo dived into the water and was gone for a long time. Finally he surfaced, and short of breath told the animals that the water is too deep for him to swim to the bottom. All were silent. Finally, Mahng, the Loon spoke up. "I can dive under the water for a long way, that is how I catch my food. I will try to make it to the bottom and return with some Earth in my beak."

The Loon disappeared and was gone for a very long time. Surely, thought the others, the Loon must have drowned. Then they saw him float to the surface, weak and nearly unconscious. "I couldn't make it, there must be no bottom to this water," he gasped. Then Zhing-gi-biss, the helldiver came forward and said "I will try next, everyone knows I can dive great distances." So the helldiver went under. Again, a very long time passed and the others thought he was surely drowned. At last he too floated to the surface. He was unconscious, and not till he came to could he relate to the others that he too was unable to fetch the Earth from the bottom.

Many more animals tried but failed, including Zhon-gwayzh', the mink, and even Mi-zhee-kay", the turtle. All failed and it seemed as though there was no way to get the much needed Earth from the bottom. Then a soft muffled voice was heard. "I can do it," it spoke softly. At first no one could see who it was that spoke up. Then, the little Wa-zhushk", muskrat stepped forward. "I'll try," he repeated. Some of the other, bigger, more powerful animals laughed at muskrat. Nanaboozhoo spoke up. "Only Kitchi-Manitou can place judgment on others. If muskrat wants to try, he should be allowed to."

So, muskrat dove into the water. He was gone much longer than any of the others who tried to reach the bottom. After a while Nanaboozhoo and the other animals were certain that muskrat had give his life trying to reach the bottom. Far below the water's surface, muskrat, had in fact reached the bottom. Very weak from lack of air, he grabbed some Earth in his paw and with all the energy he could muster began to swim for the surface. One of the animals spotted muskrat as he floated to the surface. Nanaboozhoo pulled him up onto the log. "Brothers and sisters," Nanaboozhoo said, "muskrat went too long without air, he is dead." A song of mourning and praise was heard across the water as muskrat's spirit passed on to the spirit world. Suddenly Nanaboozhoo exclaimed, "Look, there is something in his paw!" Nanaboozhoo carefully opened the tiny paw. All the animals gathered close to see what was held so tightly there. Muskrat's paw opened and revealed a small ball of Earth. The animals all shouted with joy. Muskrat sacrificed his life so that life on Earth could begin anew.

Nanaboozhoo took the piece of Earth from Muskrat's paw. Just then, the turtle swam forward and said, "Use my back to bear the weight of this piece of Earth. With the help of Kitchi-Manitou, we can make a new Earth." Nanaboozhoo put the piece of Earth on the turtle's back. Suddenly, the wind blew from each of the Four Directions, The tiny piece of Earth on the turtle's back began to grow. It grew and grew and grew until it formed a mi-ni-si', or island in the water. The island grew larger and larger, but still the turtle bore the weight of the Earth on his back. Nanaboozhoo and the animals all sang and danced in a widening circle on the growing island. After a while, the Four Winds ceased to blow and the waters became still. A huge island sat in the middle of the water, and today that island is known as North America.

Traditional Indian people, including the Ojibway, hold special reverence for the turtle who sacrificed his life and made life possible for the Earth's second people. To this day, the muskrat has been given a good life. No matter that marshes have been drained and their homes destroyed in the name of progress, the muskrat continues to survive and multiply. The muskrats do their part today in remembering the great flood; they build their homes in the shape of the little ball of Earth and the island that was formed from it.