



Old Man Remakes the World

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Native Americannorth American

Intermediate

14 min read

The sun was just sinking behind the hills when we started for War Eagle's lodge.

"To-morrow will be a fine day," said Other-person, "for grandfather says that a red sky is always the sun's promise of fine weather, and the sun cannot lie."

"Yes," said Bluebird, "and he said that when this moon was new it travelled well south for this time of year and its points were up. That means fine, warm weather."

"I wish I knew as much as grandfather," said Fine-bow with pride.

The pipe was laid aside at once upon our entering the lodge and the old warrior said:

"I have told you that OLD-man taught the animals and the birds all they know. He made them and therefore knew just what each would have to understand in order to make his living. They have never forgotten anything he told them—even to this day. Their grandfathers told the young ones what they had been told, just as I am telling you the things you should know. Be like the birds and animals—tell your children and grandchildren what I have told you, that our people may always know how things were made, and why strange things are true.

"Yes—OLD-man taught the Beaver how to build his dams to make the water deeper; taught the Squirrel to

plant the pine-nut so that another tree might grow and have nuts for his children; told the Bear to go to sleep in the winter, when the snow made hard travelling for his short legs—told him to sleep, and promised him that he would need no meat while he slept. All winter long the Bear sleeps and eats nothing, because OLD-man told him that he could. He sleeps so much in the winter that he spends most of his time in summer hunting.

“It was OLD-man who showed the Owl how to hunt at night and it was OLD-man that taught the Weasel all his wonderful ways—his bloodthirsty ways—for the Weasel is the bravest of the animal-people, considering his size. He taught the Beaver one strange thing that you have noticed, and that is to lay sticks on the creek-bottoms, so that they will stay there as long as he wants them to.

“Whenever the animal-people got into trouble they always sought OLD-man and told him about it. All were busy working and making a living, when one day it commenced to rain. That was nothing, of course, but it didn’t stop as it had always done before. No, it kept right on raining until the rivers overran their banks, and the water chased the Weasel out of his hole in the ground. Yes, and it found the Rabbit’s hiding-place and made him leave it. It crept into the lodge of the Wolf at night and frightened his wife and children. It poured into the den of the Bear among the rocks and he had to move. It crawled under the logs in the forest and found the Mice-people. Out it went to the plains and chased them out of their homes in the buffalo skulls. At last the Beavers’ dams broke under the strain and that made everything worse. It was bad—very bad, indeed. Everybody except the fish-people were frightened and all went to find OLD-man that they might tell him what had happened. Finally they found his fire, far up on a timbered bench, and they said that they wanted a council right away.

“It was a strange sight to see the Eagle sitting next to the Grouse; the Rabbit sitting close to the Lynx; the Mouse right under the very nose of the Bobcat, and the tiny Humming-bird talking to the Hawk in a whisper, as though they had always been great friends. All about OLD-man’s fire they sat and whispered or talked in signs. Even the Deer spoke to the Mountain-lion, and the Antelope told the Wolf that he was glad to see him, because fear had made them all friends.

“The whispering and the sign-making stopped when OLD-man raised his hand-like that” (here War Eagle raised his hand with the palm outward)—”and asked them what was troubling them.

“The Bear spoke first, of course, and told how the water had made him move his camp. He said all the animal-

people were moving their homes, and he was afraid they would be unable to find good camping-places, because of the water. Then the Beaver spoke, because he is wise and all the forest-people know it. He said his dams would not hold back the water that came against them; that the whole world was a lake, and that he thought they were on an island. He said he could live in the water longer than most people, but that as far as he could see they would all die except, perhaps, the fish-people, who stayed in the water all the time, anyhow. He said he couldn't think of a thing to do—then he sat down and the sign-talking and whispering commenced again.

“OLD-man smoked a long time—smoked and thought hard. Finally he grabbed his magic stone axe, and began to sing his war-song. Then the rest knew he had made up his mind and knew what he would do. Swow! he struck a mighty pine-tree a blow, and it fell down. Swow! down went another and another, until he had ten times ten of the longest, straightest, and largest trees in all the world lying side by side before him. Then OLD-man chopped off the limbs, and with the aid of magic rolled the great logs tight together. With withes of willow that he told the Beaver to cut for him, he bound the logs fast together until they were all as one. It was a monstrous raft that OLD-man had built, as he sang his song in the darkness. At last he cried, ‘Ho! everybody hurry and sit on this raft I have made’; and they did hurry.

“It was not long till the water had reached the logs; then it crept in between them, and finally it went on past the raft and off into the forest, looking for more trouble.

“By and by the raft began to groan, and the willow withes squeaked and cried out as though ghost-people were crying in the night. That was when the great logs began to tremble as the water lifted them from the ground. Rain was falling—night was there, and fear made cowards of the bravest on the raft. All through the forest there were bad noises—noises that make the heart cold—as the raft bumped against great trees rising from the earth that they were leaving forever.

“Higher and higher went the raft; higher than the bushes; higher than the limbs on the trees; higher than the Woodpecker's nest; higher than the tree tops, and even higher than the mountains. Then the world was no more, for the water had whipped the land in the war it made against it.

“Day came, and still the rain was falling. Night returned, and yet the rain came down. For many days and nights they drifted in the falling rain; whirling and twisting about while the water played with the great raft, as

a Bear would play with a Mouse. It was bad, and they were all afraid—even OLD-man himself was scared.

“At last the sun came but there was no land. All was water. The water was the world. It reached even to the sky and touched it all about the edges. All were hungry, and some of them were grumbling, too. There are always grumblers when there is great trouble, but they are not the ones who become great chiefs—ever.

“OLD-man sat in the middle of the raft and thought. He knew that something must be done, but he didn’t know what. Finally he said: ‘Ho! Chipmunk, bring me the Spotted Loon. Tell him I want him.’

“The Chipmunk found the Spotted Loon and told him that OLD-man wanted him, so the Loon went to where OLD-man sat. When he got there, OLD-man said:

“Spotted Loon you are a great diver. Nobody can dive as you can. I made you that way and I know. If you will dive and swim down to the world I think you might bring me some of the dirt that it is made of—then I am sure I can make another world.’

“It is too deep, this water,’ replied the Loon, ‘I am afraid I shall drown.’

“Well, what if you do?’ said OLD-man. ‘I gave you life, and if you lose it this way I will return it to you. You shall live again!’

“All right, OLD-man,’ he answered, ‘I am willing to try’; so he waddled to the edge of the raft. He is a poor walker—the Loon, and you know I told you why. It was all because OLD-man kicked him in the back the night he painted all the Duck-people.

“Down went the Spotted Loon, and long he stayed beneath the water. All waited and watched, and longed for good luck, but when he came to the top he was dead. Everybody groaned—all felt badly, I can tell you, as OLD-man laid the dead Loon on the logs. The Loon’s wife was crying, but OLD-man told her to shut up and she did.

“Then OLD-man blew his own breath into the Loon’s bill, and he came back to life.

“What did you see, Brother Loon?’ asked OLD-man, while everybody crowded as close as he could.

“Nothing but water,’ answered the Loon, ‘we shall all die here, I cannot reach the world by swimming. My heart stops working.’

“There were many brave ones on the raft, and the Otter tried to reach the world by diving; and the Beaver, and the Gray Goose, and the Gray Goose’s wife; but all died in trying, and all were given a new life by OLD-man. Things were bad and getting worse. Everybody was cross, and all wondered what OLD-man would do next, when somebody laughed.

“All turned to see what there could be to laugh at, at such a time, and OLD-man turned about just in time to see the Muskrat bid good-by to his wife—that was what they were laughing at. But he paid no attention to OLD-man or the rest, and slipped from the raft to the water. Flip!—his tail cut the water like a knife, and he was gone. Some laughed again, but all wondered at his daring, and waited with little hope in their hearts; for the Muskrat wasn’t very great, they thought.

“He was gone longer than the Loon, longer than the Beaver, longer than the Otter or the Gray Goose or his wife, but when he came to the surface of the water he was dead.

“OLD-man brought Muskrat back to life, and asked him what he had seen on his journey. Muskrat said: ‘I saw trees, OLD-man, but I died before I got to them.’

“OLD-man told him he was brave. He said his people should forever be great if he succeeded in bringing some dirt to the raft; so just as soon as the Muskrat was rested he dove again.

“When he came up he was dead, but clinched in his tiny hand OLD-man found some dirt—not much, but a little. A second time OLD-man gave the Muskrat his breath, and told him that he must go once more, and bring dirt. He said there was not quite enough in the first lot, so after resting a while the Muskrat tried a third time and a third time he died, but brought up a little more dirt.

“Everybody on the raft was anxious now, and they were all crowding about OLD-man; but he told them to stand back, and they did. Then he blew his breath in Muskrat’s mouth a third time, and a third time he lived and joined his wife.

“OLD-man then dried the dirt in his hands, rubbing it slowly and singing a queer song. Finally it was dry; then

he settled the hand that held the dirt in the water slowly, until the water touched the dirt. The dry dirt began to whirl about and then OLD-man blew upon it. Hard he blew and waved his hands, and the dirt began to grow in size right before their eyes. OLD-man kept blowing and waving his hands until the dirt became real land, and the trees began to grow. So large it grew that none could see across it. Then he stopped his blowing and sang some more. Everybody wanted to get off the raft, but OLD-man said 'no.'

"Come here, Wolf,' he said, and the Wolf came to him.

"You are swift of foot and brave. Run around this land I have made, that I may know how large it is.'

"The Wolf started, and it took him half a year to get back to the raft. He was very poor from much running, too, but OLD-man said the world wasn't big enough yet so he blew some more, and again sent the Wolf out to run around the land. He never came back—no, the OLD-man had made it so big that the Wolf died of old age before he got back to the raft. Then all the people went out upon the land to make their living, and they were happy, there, too.

"After they had been on the land for a long time OLD-man said: 'Now I shall make a man and a woman, for I am lonesome living with you people. He took two or three handfuls of mud from the world he had made, and moulded both a man and a woman. Then he set them side by side and breathed upon them. They lived!—and he made them very strong and healthy—very beautiful to look upon. Chippewas, he called these people, and they lived happily on that world until a white man saw an Eagle sailing over the land and came to look about. He stole the woman—that white man did; and that is where all the tribes came from that we know to-day. None are pure of blood but the two humans he made of clay, and their own children. And they are the Chippewas!

"That is a long story and now you must hurry to bed. To-morrow night I will tell you another story—Ho!"

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