

Transcript of
“The Creation of Earth,”
retold by Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki)

Night is coming. One by one, the stars appear. Night is coming, and soon it will be time for stories.

Long ago, storytellers invented magical stories about the sun, moon, stars, and the other great mysteries of the sky. The stories were not meant to explain these mysteries. Rather, they were told to help people pay attention to our world.

Today, scientists use another way to help us pay attention to the mysteries of the sky. By observing, measuring, and predicting, they explain how the world works. And like the storytellers of old, today’s scientists can lead us to better know and care for our world.

Storytellers and scientists are today’s sky tellers, for they both tell us about the sky. Though each tells us a different kind of story, both help us to better know our world and ourselves.

Night is here. Listen now. This is the time for stories.

Long ago, before this earth came to be, there was another world high above the sky dome. There were beings in the shape of humans who lived there. In the center of that sky world grew a great tree from whose branches hung all sorts of fruit. On top of that tree, was a huge white flower that shown as brightly as the sun. So it was that life and light came from the Sky Tree.

Among those beings was a man who cared for this tree of life. His wife was expecting and she began to have dreams. In her dreams, she saw that there was something beyond and below their world.

“The tree of life must be uprooted,” she said to her husband. “I do not know how, but something good will come of this.” And though it troubled him to do so, he saw that her dream was strong. He did as she asked, and uprooted the Sky Tree.

There, where the tree had been rooted, was a great hole in the Sky Land. The woman looked down into that hole but all that could be seen was a deep darkness. She got down on her knees and leaned forward for it seemed that there was something else far, far below. Then she slipped. She reached back to try to save herself from falling but she only succeeded in grabbing a hand full of seeds from the uprooted tree, a strawberry plant in her right hand, and a tobacco plant in her left. Down she fell into that deep, deep dark, and all around her was a sound like the soft shushing of a rattle. For a long time, she fell until she began to see brightness far below her. It was the blue gleam of water.

In that water, there were birds and other beings that looked up and saw her falling. “Someone is coming,” they said, “we must help her.”

Then the wide winged birds, the geese, and swans flew up and caught her between their inter-laced wings. But as they brought her down, they wondered where they would place her. For they knew, somehow, that she could not live in the water.

Great Turtle swam to the surface and looked up. "Can you hold this one who fell?" the birds called down to Great Turtle. "I will do so," Great Turtle replied.

And so Sky Woman was placed on the turtle's back. Then the water beings gathered around her. "Where are you from?" they asked. "How can we make you comfortable?"

Sky Woman looked around her. "I have come from another place far above here where there is land," she said. "Here, there is only water. I am lonely for earth."

"It is said that underneath this water there is land," the water being said. "We will bring some up for you."

Then they began to try to dive down to the bottom. The duck and the beaver tried, and then the loon. But they could not swim deep enough to reach the earth beneath the waters. Many tried and failed.

Finally, Muskrat dove. Down she went. Down, down, down. Her lungs were ready to burst but she did not stop. She reached the bottom and gathered some earth in her paws and then floated back up. It was so far down that when Muskrat reached the surface, she died, but she still held that earth in her paws.

As soon as it was placed on the turtle's back, that small paw-full of earth started to spread. Sky Woman began to move in a circle, dancing with small steps, her feet massaging the new earth to encourage it to grow even more. Where she made footprints in the moist earth, she dropped the seeds from the Sky Tree; and bushes, and trees, and flowers began to grow up. She planted the tobacco and the strawberries and they grew well on the new land that stretched further than the eye could see in every direction.

So it was that this earth on turtle's back came to be long, long ago.

"Donaho."