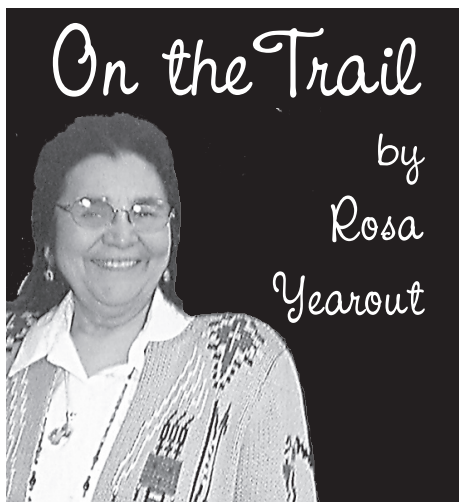


The Nez Perce story of creation

The Christian creation story is summarized by Gen. 1:31, "God saw all that had been made, and indeed it was very good." Like most indigenous people, the Nez Perce (*Nimiipuu*) have legends and creation stories. The main characters of these stories or legends were the first inhabitants of Mother Earth - the animals, birds and insects - and their early presence is forever embedded in rock formations in the landscape all around us. They talked to each other and experienced many things just like human beings do now (family life, friendships, rivalries), and they had different personality traits, some good, some bad. The stories often taught a lesson, and Coyote (*iceyeye*) was usually the main character. He was many things, but especially a trickster, teacher or hero. The following story tells how Coyote made the different people, including the Nez Perce, and how certain animals came to look as they do today.



connected with one's guardian spirit, or *Weyekin*). Coyote tied all the ropes around his waist. Now, he was ready and yelled out, "Its-welks! Its-welks!" The Monster looked around and said, "Who's that? Who's calling me?" Coyote stood up and yelled, "It's me ... Coyote!" The Monster replied, "Oh-h-h, there you are. What are you doing up there?" Coyote shouted, "I'm coming down to you and we're going to test out our powers. Let's try to inhale each other!" The Monster said, "Okay, but you try to swallow me first." Coyote checked his ropes, and found them all nice and tight. Coyote took a deep, noisy breath and inhaled, but the only thing that moved was a tiny hair on the Monster's ear!

A long time ago (*wakiipa*) before the coming of human beings (*La-te-tel-wit*), Coyote was going along the Big River (*Himeq'ishnime*) and noticed that Salmon was having difficulty getting over the waterfalls. He said, "I'll build a fish ladder so that Salmon can go upstream for the people to catch." While he was busy working, Magpie flew over and shouted at him, "What are you doing, Coyote?" Coyote looked up and said, "I'm building a fish ladder so the fish can go upstream and feed my people." Magpie said, "Ah, there's no reason for you to do that now, because the Monster, Its-welks, swallowed all the people. He's up in the valley near Kamiah." Coyote said, "So that's what happened to all my friends. Well, that's where I'll go too." As he started on his journey, he made a plan to save the people. He said, "I will first take a real good sweat to get my power and clean myself; in case the Monster eats me, he won't find me repulsive and vomit me up!"

Then Coyote said, "You have already swallowed all the people, so you should swallow me too. I don't want to be lonely." The Monster did not know that Coyote had a pack strapped to his back with five flintstone knives and fire starters. Monster opened his mouth wide, inhaled like a mighty wind and pulled Coyote toward him, but the ropes held Coyote back. Its-welks said to himself, "He-e-e-y! that little guy has a lot more power than I thought!" With that, Coyote cut the ropes and went flying through the air. Before being swallowed by the Monster, he reached into his backpack and threw out the roots and berries that he brought with him, saying, "Soon, the human beings (*La-te-tel-wit*) will be coming, and they will find great fields of these camas and berries and they will be happy." (That's why this land was once abundant with camas and berries.)

Coyote went up over Camas Prairie. He made some flint knives and got some pitch and moss to start a fire. He also gathered some camas and serviceberries and put everything in his pack. When he arrived at the breaks overlooking Kamiah Valley, he got down on his belly and carefully peeked through the grass and looked down the hillside. He saw the Monster and exclaimed, "E-e-e!" He had never seen anything like it before in his life. The head was huge, and its big body was stretched way far off somewhere in the distance. The Monster had just eaten and he was sleeping away, with his head on his hands.

Whoosh, Coyote went right into the monster's mouth. "Yummmm," the Monster purred in satisfaction, laid back down and was content. Coyote made it safely inside. He got his flint and made a little torch and started walking down the Monster's throat. As he went along, he saw bones scattered all about. Soon, he met all the animals, all his friends. They were so glad to see him, they jumped up and down. His close friend, Fox, greeted him warmly and said, "I was wondering when you were coming to save us.

Coyote made some strong ropes out of hemp and tied them one at a time around three great mountains, Pilot Knob, Seven Devil's and Cottonwood Butte (all sacred places



Coyote (*iceyeye*), courtesy of www.weforanimals.com

The Monster is so dangerous. What are you going to do to him?"

Coyote said, "Well, I have a plan, but I will need some help. First, get all the boys together and have them gather all the bones of the dead people and pile them by the Monster's openings. We will kick the bones out when the Monster dies." Fox ran and told the boys, and they gathered the bones of the dead people and put them by all the Monster's openings.

went out too, including Coyote. They ran out of his nose, out of his eyes, out of his ears, out of his mouth and out of the back end. Muskrat was the last one to run out of the back end, but he was so slow, and when the Monster died his back end closed tightly, right over Muskrat's furry tail, his beautiful furry tail! Muskrat cried out, "Oh, no!" He sat there, pulling on his tail, and he pulled off all his hair! Coyote looked at him and said, "Now what will you do? You're always the last one. You'll just be a scavenger the rest of your life!" (That's why Muskrat doesn't have any hair on his tail!)

Next, Coyote said, "Now have them gather all the wood and bring it to the heart." As they were heading that way, Old Grizzly Bear rushed out at them, roaring, "What are you doing here, Coyote?" Coyote said, "I came to save you, so why are you trying to be so ferocious to me?" Then, he kicked Grizzly hard on the nose. (That's why today Grizzly Bear has a different head than Black Bear.) Then, they ran into Rattlesnake, who was just mad and rattling "Chish, chish, chish." He said to Coyote, "What are you doing here? I was going to save the people. I'm the one who has the most power." Coyote said, "Oh, you are so ferocious to me and everybody else, but you are nothing but a pest!" Then, Coyote stepped down hard on his head. (That's why today Rattlesnake has a flat head.) Coyote told Rattlesnake, "From now on, you're just going to be a pest and you'll really be scared of people and you'll run away when they come by, but sometimes you'll be brave, and they'll kill you." (That's what happens to rattlesnakes today!)

All the animals were standing around the dead Monster cheering, "Monster's dead! Monster's dead!" Coyote got some blood from the Monster and sprinkled it on the bones. Suddenly, all those who died while inside the Monster came back to life!

When Coyote and his friends arrived at the heart of the Monster, Coyote cut off slabs of fat from the great heart and threw them to the hungry people to eat. He took the flint and pitch from his backpack and started a fire with the wood gathered under the Monster's heart. Smoke from the fire began to drift up through the Monster's eyes, nose, ears and out his back end. Then, Coyote jumped on the Monster's heart and took out one of his five knives and started cutting away. Its-welks, the Monster, cried out "O-o-oh, I'm getting heart burn! I knew I shouldn't have eaten that Coyote."

Coyote said, "Now I am going to cut up the Monster." Coyote began cutting and flinging pieces of the Monster's body to all four directions: toward the place of sunrise, toward the place of sunset, toward the cold place and toward the hot place. Wherever the pieces landed, a new tribe began: the Coeur d'Alene, Blackfeet, Flathead, Umatilla, Yakama, Shoshone and on and on. Coyote was busy throwing meat from the Monster every which way when Fox said to him, "What about the people who will live here? You have used up most of the body of the Monster and gave it to faraway lands."

Coyote told the people, "Get yourselves ready to go out through the Monster's opening that is closest to you. Take the old women and old men close to the openings so that they will be ready to get out." Coyote kept cutting away on the huge heart and broke one knife after another, until he was down to his last knife and the heart finally fell off. The Monster gasped, "O-o-o-o-oh!" and started to die. The people quickly kicked the bones out of the Monster's openings and then

Coyote said, "Oh, I forgot all about that! Then he turned to the people and said, "Bring me some water from this clear river (the Clearwater River) to wash my hands." With the bloody water, he threw drops over the land around him and said, "Where this blood lands and with this heart will grow a people who may be little because I did not give them enough of the Monster's body, but they will be very brave, powerful in war, skilled hunters and fishermen, and have good hearts. They will be known as the *Nimiipuu*, my children (*iceyeenim mamay'ac*)." That's how the *Nimiipuu* (later called Nez Perce) came to be. Today, the rock formations of the heart and liver of the Monster can still be seen in the beautiful Kamiah Valley in Idaho.



Heart of the Monster site, Nez Perce National Historical Park, Spalding

Note: This story is compiled from "Nu-Mee-Poom Tit-Wah-Tit: Nez Perce Legends," published by the Nez Perce Tribe in 1972; a narration by Nez Perce member Mari Watters (1934-1992); and Rosa's memories of family stories. For more information or to offer your own stories, e-mail rosamy@hughes.net.