

“For the Beauty of the Earth”

Three Earth Tales, told by Dan Lillie
delivered on April 14, 2019
at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

Introduction

Rather than a sermon today, I've decided to share some wisdom from around the world, *about* the world. I'm going to tell you three Earth Tales that come from different cultures. But what they have in common, is that they all have important things to tell us about our relationship with the earth.

I got all three of these Earth Tales from a book called *The Barefoot Book of Earth Tales* by Dawn Casey and Anne Wilson.

[Hold up and show book]

Earth Tale I

The first Earth Tale I'm going to share is from Australia called *The Sun Mother*. This is an origin story, which means it is about the beginning of the world.

The Sun Mother

Long, long ago, in the time before time, there was darkness and silence. The earth was asleep. Under the surface of the land, all the forms of life lay sleeping. Up in the sky, the Sun Mother was also asleep.

Until one day, she heard the Great Spirit whisper, “Wake up, my child.”

The Sun Mother opened her eyes, and light washed over the world.

The Great Spirit spoke again. “It is time for you to wake the Earth.”

The Sun Mother flew down to the empty Earth. The ground was cold and hard beneath her feet. But as she gently started to walk across the bare soil, she could feel something happening under her feet: With each step she took, green grass sprang up in her footprints.

As the Sun Mother walked across every step of the Earth, the land became alive. Leaves uncurled, flower buds blossomed; trees sunk their roots into the ground as their branches reached up to the sky.

When the Sun Mother had done this, the Great Spirit spoke again. "Daughter, go into the caverns of the Earth and wake up the sleeping animal spirits."

And so the Sun Mother went to the still-sleeping regions below the surface of the Earth.

In the first cave, she awoke caterpillars, beetles, ants, and bees. She woke ladybugs and butterflies, and many colorful insects.

In the next cave, the Sun Mother found solid ice; but as she stepped on it, the ice began to melt and squish between her toes. Water began to trickle; which turned into a stream; which became a rushing river that flowed from the cave, filling ponds, lakes, and lagoons, and finally, filling the great seas and the vast oceans.

Then the Sun Mother entered a third cave, even deeper than the last. She shone lovingly and woke up the birds and animals. A parade of paws, claws, and wings, feathers, fur and scales, the animals emerged from below the surface to roam the earth.

The Sun Mother returned to the sky to see all that she had done. As she circled around the Earth, admiring all of creation, the creatures of the earth watched her disappear over the rim of the world, and they were afraid. "What if we never see the Sun Mother again?" they cried.

But as the Sun Mother continued her journey across the wide arc of the sky, she came back upon the creatures, approaching from the east. And now they understood that the Sun Mother had not left them, but that she would come back to visit them every day.

And so, the rhythm of the day and night came to be. Time passed. Dawns and sunsets came and went.

The creatures began to forget how good the moment was when they had emerged from the caves. They began to complain.

"I want to swoop and soar like a bird," said a tiny mouse.

"I want to swim like a fish," said a furry feline.

And the Sun Mother said, "I want all of my creatures to be content. If you are unhappy with your shape, I will give you a chance to change it, but choose carefully!"

And this is how some mice got wings and became bats, and how some cats and dogs slipped into the water as seals and beavers. Certain insects were granted their wish to look like twigs and leaves.

When all of the creatures were content with their forms, the Sun Mother said, "Now I will give you beings to light up the night sky."

And from her own being, she created Morning Star and Moon.

From their sky home, Morning Star and Moon looked down at the Earth, where the birds were building their nests and all the happy creatures were living and loving with their companions and their young.

Morning Star and Moon wanted the same kind of love that Mother Sun had made for all the creatures, and they descended to earth to have children of their own. And so they created the first human beings.

And when Mother Sun saw the humans that Morning Star and Moon had created, she said, "Welcome! You belong to this place. All around you are your family: the land and the waters, the plants and the animals. You are all part of the same spirit.

The Earth is alive. The Earth is sacred. Care for creation. Look after the land for your ancestors, and for your children, and for your children's children."

And the vibrant world danced with life. Creatures of every color and kind swam, flew, crawled, slithered, and ran through the forests, mountains, oceans, and sky. And people tried their best to care for creation.

It was a beautiful world. It still is.

Reflection

I want to pause for a moment, to reflect on this story. And rather than trying to identify what you think the lesson is, or come up with a great summary, I wonder what it makes you wonder about? I wonder if you can reflect on this story with curiosity and questions, rather than with certainty and answers.

So rather than, "I think this story is about..." can you phrase your response as, "I wonder..."

To give you a personal example, in response to this story, I wonder: what can I do to help shift my thinking from being in control of the world, to being a beautiful part of it?

Take a moment to consider: What do you wonder?

[Take one question/answer from someone]

Earth Tale II

The next Earth Tale I'm going to share is much closer, and likely more familiar. This story from the Comanche nation is called *She Who Is Alone*.

She Who Is Alone

No mother. No father. The famine had taken the girl's whole family. The people of the camp, the Comanche, cared for her and named her. They called her She Who Is Alone.

Since the famine, her only friend was her little buckskin doll. Her father had saved the softest hide to make the doll's body. Her mother had painted on the eyes and mouth with a dye made

from berries. Her mother had even used her own hair to make the doll's long black braids. And in her hair, the doll had a beautiful, bright blue feather.

Every new spring moon, She Who Is Alone watched as the Comanche people would dance, singing and praying to the Great Spirit to send the life-giving rains. But this year, the rains had not come. Plants wilted. Rivers dried up. The land cracked. Hunters returned without buffalo. Many people died.

So the wisest Elder went up to the high hilltop. "Great Spirit," he said, "the land is dying. Your people are dying. Tell us what we have done wrong. Tell us what we must do to bring back the rain."

Then he sat on that high hilltop all night, waiting for the answer from the Great Spirit.

As the sun came up the next morning, the Elder returned and the people gathered round.

He said, "The Great Spirit has sent me a vision. Our people have been careless. We have taken and taken from Mother Earth, but we have given nothing in return. This drought is a warning.

We must give something back, an offering to the Great Spirit. Our most precious possession. We must burn it and scatter the ashes to the Four Winds. Only then will the rains return."

The people looked at each other.

"Surely it is not my bow the Great Spirit wants," said a young warrior. "I need it to hunt so that we may eat."

"The Great Spirit doesn't want my blanket," said someone else. "I will freeze without it."

"Not my moccasins!" said another. "They are too beautiful to burn."

The discussion lasted all day. As night fell, people went off to bed with the issue still undecided.

Unable to sleep, She Who Is Alone clutched her doll as she lay quietly in her lodge. What could she, a young girl do for the Great Spirit, she wondered. And then, she knew.

"You," she said to her doll. "You are my most prized possession." She knew what she had to do.

Slipping out into the night, carrying her doll, She Who Is Alone went up to the high hilltop, where the Elder had his vision. She gathered twigs and sticks, and started a fire. And then she prayed: "Oh Great Spirit, please help me to be brave. All I have in the world is my doll. She is the most precious thing I can give."

And as she sat on the high hilltop, she thought of her people— how they had cared for her, and how they were suffering.

With tears in her eyes, she said, "Oh Great Spirit, please accept my gift and send us rain again," and dropped her doll into the flames. She watched as the fire accepted her offering.

When the doll had burned up completely, and the last of the embers had cooled, She Who Is Alone picked up the ashes, and scattered them to the Four Winds.

Then, exhausted, she fell asleep.

When she awoke at daybreak, she could hardly believe her eyes. For as far as the eye could see, in every direction from that high hilltop, the land was covered in a sea of blue flowers. The most beautiful blue flowers you've ever seen. They were the brilliant, bright blue of the feather that had decorated her doll's hair.

Looking back to the village, she could see others stirring, also amazed by the sight. And just as she turned to make her way down from the high hilltop, she felt it. A drop on the top of her head. And then, another, on her arm. As she turned her face toward the sky, the clouds opened up and poured down the life-giving rains, and the land began to heal.

A great ceremony was held, and She Who Is Alone was given a new name, which the Elder called out to the Four Winds. He called it out to the sky and to the Earth. From that day on, she was called: She Who Loves Her People.

And every new spring moon, the Great Spirit remembers the gift of that little girl, and fills the land with bright blue flowers, as far as the eye can see.

Reflection

Let's pause to reflect again. What does this story make you wonder about?

[Pause]

I wonder what I can sacrifice for the good of our shared world? Can I give up single-use disposables (straws, grocery bags, coffee cups)? I wonder how I can give to the earth, rather than taking from it?

What do you wonder?

[Take one question/answer from someone]

Earth Tale III

Our third Earth Tale today is from India, and it's called Amrita's Tree.

Amrita's Tree

Amrita leaned back against her favorite tree and rested. There was nowhere in the world she liked better. The cool green cover of the forest grove was nice and cool, especially after being out in the hot desert sun.

Sometimes she talked to her tree, sharing her daydreams and secrets. Sometimes, she just sat beneath it in peaceful silence.

Today, as she sat taking in the sounds of the forest. And then, suddenly, the sounds changed. The birds all took flight, cawing loudly as they flew up and away. A rabbit darted past her and disappeared into the brush.

Amrita was on her feet in an instant, alert. As she wandered toward the source of the sounds that had sent the birds away, she stopped suddenly when she caught sight of the men. They were carrying axes.

“Cut down every tree you can!” she heard the chief woodcutter say. “The Maharajah needs plenty of wood to build his palace.”

Amrita froze. They couldn’t cut down her forest! Where would she go to escape the desert sun? And her tree! The thought of someone cutting her tree down was just too much to bear.

Fast as she could, Amrita ran back to the village. She ran straight to her mother.

“Mom!” she yelled, “there are men with axes in the forest, and they are going to cut down the trees!”

Amrita’s mother immediately set down the water pot she had been carrying. “We cannot let that happen,” she said.

Amrita and her mother quickly gathered the women and children of the village, and off they went back to the forest.

They arrived to find the woodcutters sharpening their axes. Amrita’s mother approached them politely. “Namaste,” she said. “We do not want trouble, but we cannot let you cut down these trees. Their roots hold the soil together. Without them, our fields and homes will be washed away in a mudslide when the monsoon rains come.

The chief woodcutter was unmoved. “You don’t own these trees, and we have orders from the Maharajah. Now excuse us.”

And with that, he nodded to one of his men, who began chopping into an ancient khejari tree. With every swing, the axe, bite deeper into the trunk. In a matter of moments, the giant tree came crashing down.

“No!” Amrita cried.

“Little girl, get out of the way!” said the woodcutter as he moved toward Amrita’s tree. Her special tree.

“No!” she yelled again. “I won’t let you cut this tree down!” She ran to the tree and threw her arms around it, hugging it as tightly as she possibly could. “If you want to cut it down, you’ll have to cut through me!”

“Swing your axe!” Commanded the Chief Woodcutter.

But the Woodcutter could not do it. He would not do it. “I can’t,” he said, and dropped his axe to the ground.

Amrita looked around. To her surprise, all of the women and children were hugging trees.

The Woodcutters were stunned. They didn’t know what to do. They all gathered together and whispered. And then, without a word, they took their axes and left the forest.

Once the men were gone, Amrita rushed to her mother.

“Amrita, what were you thinking?” her mother said. “How dangerous! And I’m afraid it will all be for nothing. Those men are certain to tell the Maharajah about this.”

Sure enough, the next day, the Maharajah himself appeared in the village.

“Where is the little girl who put herself in harm’s way to save a tree?”

“Here I am!” Amrita said. “I did what I had to do to save my tree, and I would do it again!”

“That won’t be necessary“ said the Maharajah. “I am here to present you, and the women of your village, with this royal decree. In honor of your courage and wisdom, I promise that no tree in this forest shall ever be cut down.”

Hundreds of years later, Amrita’s courage has inspired many people to join together to protect forests. Thousands of trees have been saved; and in one sacred grove, Amrita’s tree still grows.

Reflection

Let’s pause again, this time to reflect on the tale of *Amrita’s Tree*. What does it make you wonder about? What questions come up for you in response to the story?

I wonder what sacred parts of the world around me can I help protect and preserve?

What do you wonder?

[Take one question/answer from someone]