

**Genesis 1, selections** (NRSV) And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

As humans, we are tied to story. Knowing our story is a basic human need. We have a need to know the story of our lives, our ancestors, our culture. We have a need to know the story of Earth, our home, and how this world came to be. When pieces of these stories are missing, there is a hole in us where the story should be. So we tell and retell stories. We tell stories at bedtime, at church, around campfires, in the forest, with backyard telescopes, with textbooks in hand, with children in our laps. We tell stories told by our parents, our grandparents, stories of scripture, stories from other cultures that resonate within us. The stories

tell us how we came to be and help us to understand who we are.

We're in a little bit of a unique position here on Turtle Island, because the stories that are indigenous to this land are not our stories. And our stories come from the ancient cultures of a distant land. The creation stories from Genesis 1 and 2 have much in common with epic stories from ancient Mesopotamia . . . it seems the ancient stories were adapted to Israelite theology and included in the larger creation narratives.<sup>1</sup> The stories belong to that place,<sup>2</sup> today's Israel/Palestine . . . and yet have circled the world and offered their wisdom to peoples on every continent. They were introduced to the ancestors of many of us in Europe and Great Britain . . . and traveled with immigrants to Turtle Island. It feels important to acknowledge that the stories came not in their original form, but already in new translations . . . and with them came standards for interpretation.

I understand from Hebrew scholars that the original language brings the scriptures alive. Authors play with the rhythm and rhyme of the Hebrew language. Some employ a playfulness or use

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<sup>1</sup> The Jewish Study Bible, Jewish Publication Society, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Learning to Die p. 11

words with more than one meaning to bring depth or irony to a phrase.

When it comes to Genesis 1, even in English the story has a lovely cadence and pattern as it describes the 7 days of creation. In my hearing, the reader gets to the sixth day and my mind and heart often stumble over the word translated dominion. If you're like me, perhaps you pause and wonder, 'hmm, what do I do with that word and idea that humans are to have dominion over the rest of creation?' One Hebrew scholar tells us the word can also be translated "hold sway," suggesting an absolute or even fierce exercise of mastery.<sup>3</sup> Still we get around it, the word is there.

Poet and scholar Robert Bringham argues that when it comes to this part of the text, the Hebrew is laughing to itself. Bringham writes: the narrators understand human nature. They "know they are dealing with hubris, not with beatitude. And in spite of, or because of [it], the Hebrew text is laughing to itself, weaving a cat's cradle of puns, reversals, and half-rhymes that ring like soft alarm bells. Not everyone who reads the text in Hebrew hears the laughter or that irony . . . but in translation, no one

hears the laughter."<sup>4</sup> In translation we take the text at its word.

Many contemporary scholars skip over the word dominion when writing on the passage. Perhaps they would argue that it's a detail that stands outside the main themes of Genesis, and so is not a focus for comment. Still, people have been debating this word decade after decade, because they recognized the influence it has had on the mindset of the western world.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann is one theologian who doesn't step around the issue. He asserts that if God gifts humans in particular with dominion over the rest of creation, it comes with "immense responsibility, for the work of humankind is to care for the earth even as the Creator has already begun to care, to protect and enhance the earth as God's creation."<sup>5</sup> With the alarming imbalance in the global climate, I'm sure the fact is not lost on any of us that the fate of creation is closely related to the human ability to follow God's directive.

Here we are with this enormous God-given responsibility to care for the earth, one we must

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<sup>3</sup> Five Books of Moses, Robert Alter, p. 12

<sup>4</sup> Learning to Die, p. 10

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, Reverberations of Faith, p. 106

execute with fierce mastery . . . I don't know about you, but I don't feel equipped. The teaching stories of scripture include the importance of caring for creation, even criticism when it isn't done well . . . but unless I missed it, scripture doesn't break down the lessons for us . . . perhaps they were written between the words. So, who are our teachers? Where do we find the lessons? How do we learn what we need to know in order to fulfill this responsibility?

Colonizers came to Turtle Island with much more knowledge than we have now about the natural world – knowledge that was all but lost with the rise of industrialization – they also came with a worldview shaped in part by Genesis 1. I've heard it said many times that the colonizers who came to Turtle Island needed to learn from the First Peoples of this land . . . that they came here to learn the lessons. For Robin Wall Kimmerer, learning the lessons is part of a foreigner becoming Naturalized to a place. She writes, "Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit . . . here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities . . .

take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do."<sup>6</sup>

Most of the colonizers of Turtle Island didn't do this well. They came with arrogance, fear, disrespect, used their stories as weapons and tools for oppression. They not only didn't learn from their hosts, they intentionally took from the land and destroyed cultures. So, as descendants of colonizers and as new immigrants to Turtle Island, to become Naturalized, we have a lot of learning to catch up on. Even with all the damage done, First Peoples still know a lot about the human place in creation and our responsibility to creation . . . we have much to learn from them . . . and much to reconcile.

One step we might take on the road of Naturalization is to consider the story of Skywoman alongside Genesis 1 . . . what if they engaged in a dialogue within each of us? What if we had some curiosity about how Skywoman's story fills in some of the spaces between the words of Genesis? What gifts might Skywoman have for us?

What strikes me most today about Skywoman's story is the eagerness and commitment of all the animals to help her and the dance of gratitude she offers in return. Without their help she certainly

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<sup>6</sup> Braiding Sweetgrass p. 214-15.

would have fallen into the sea and drowned . . . but because of their gifts and her own gifts, all lived in greater abundance. The story affirms that no individual has a greater importance than the others, rather their mindset that all are responsible to one another grew the land all of us now call home.