

Once Upon a Turtle: How to Build a World

We are a religion without a prominent mythology. We are poorer for it. Myths frame and render a meaningful world. They enchant, challenge, smuggle all kinds of useful information, and draw us both into our souls and out, into the soul of the world. By operating in more than rational space, they allow us to connect with our depths and the depth of all we encounter. And we UU's do not have any.

It is the fundamental challenge to our tradition. We came by it honestly. It was our bite at the apple, to reference someone else's story. Myth was the cost of our freedom. We sacrificed our stories to escape the religions of our ancestors and see if we might, in a new light, build something more suited to the world in which we find ourselves.

And now here on the other side, we find that in order to build something more suited to the world in which we find ourselves, we need stories. It's a conundrum. And if its stories we need to find, we pretty quickly arrive at the question; where do stories come from? Where do these tools of rendering and connection and meaning come from?

I think one answer, or a part of THE answer, is that they are part of the co-evolutionary suite of language, consciousness, and self-awareness. They grow up with culture. And as cultures move and blend, so to do myths. In doing so, they change and transform as we have. Why is that important? It's important because if stories are bound to our origin and evolution and are, like both our bodies and our UU tradition, constantly evolving, then we may justify respectfully engaging with the stories of others, discovering how and if they can come alive for us and speak to us.

Parts of them will likely speak to us in similar ways that speak to the cultures in which they have most recently, most prominently made a home. Parts of them will speak only to their home culture. And parts of them may well speak to us in a different way.

And so to help us frame and render a meaningful world, we set about telling tales from other houses in the hopes we will hear something compelling to us, something that re-connects us to a world that veered long ago out of connection and into alienation.

For the past two or three years, we have been telling what we call Bone Stories; tales that resonate deeply, tales that live in our bones. Bone Stories. These stories are meant to echo themes that emerge in the ceremonies we do each month. But while we have heard some delightful and profound tales told in wondrous ways, I don't think we were accomplishing our ambition. I'm aware that they often left you all puzzled as to what they are for.

I haven't given up on exploring stories with you. Sometimes progress is iterative. But in the spirit of function follows form, we are evolving our format, which reflects a slightly evolved strategy. Once a month, anyone interested in moving these stories more into your heart and making a more meaningful world can attend a Bone Stories expansion session. These are profound and deep. We held our first one last week and it was good. We connected and learned a lot.

And then, following that, once a month I will spelunk through the tale with you all here on a Sunday. Which is what I aim to do this morning.

The Bone Stories collective looked at our liturgical year and found that our ceremonies grouped themselves thematically by season and theme. The first three ceremonies, water communion, ancestors day, and soil communion illustrate what we're calling "Big Community." Big Community includes community in general, the kind of thing we're trying to foster here. But it also includes finding community with the world and all its creations; from other cultures to other species, to other forms of life. Birds, trees, mountains and, dare I say, MAGA. We are in community whether we like it or not. So how can stories help us connect with and navigate community?

And so it was that we chose the Heudenoshone creation story.

There are a few things that really light up for me when I consider these two stories; the first told by Rae a couple weeks ago about Sky Woman and the Muskrat's sacrifice, and the sequel about the twins told by Bob this morning.

In Rae's telling, we heard about a being of light falling into a watery dimension through a hole in the *roots of the world tree* in the sky world. Sky Woman falling as if lightning were striking the primordial ooze and generating life. But maybe less lightning and more comet. For we are told it took some time for her fall.

But what does it mean that creation requires a passage *through roots*? That strikes me as meaningful. I'm not sure what it means exactly. But... passing through roots, through ancestors, through tradition, through groundedness - moving through roots is necessary for discovery of the new. In some ways this mirrors the Root and Reckon program; a group of All Souls folks who have investigated our history through land stories to discover both grace and debt in order to move us toward equity and liberation. Just like them, Sky Woman passes through AND falls through roots and... into what?

A murky work. A watery world. A world without definition, neither the clarity of the bright Sky World, nor the reliability of the earth. A period of unknowing. Unknowingness, a lack of certainty, are part of the process of creation... that and, of necessity, a fair bit of faith.

Sky Woman's faith is answered by the swans who catch her fall. In light of that I invite you to see swans as a reminder to think about faith, a prompt to have faith and recall that faith is necessary to success and happiness.

Let faith then deliver you to firmament, which is also a living thing - the back of a turtle - a creature whose capacity is multiplied by care and attention. Sky Woman dances on the turtle and the turtle shell grows from horizon to horizon. That dance is care and attention.

Yet as wide as the land grew, there was yet no way to grow anything on it. It was just hard shell, or rock. They needed soil to grow and after the entire community mustered to locate soil, it was the humble muskrat that had the skill and the will to secure it. Only it cost him his life. Do you remember that form when Rae told it? A little soil in his tiny dead paw?

This is a huge moment. It's a bold, possibly even controversial, claim delivered in this little heartbreak. Does thriving require sacrifice? Does happiness depend on heartbreak? Does life require death? Maybe just a little death? Something humble made holy by sacrifice? In this case that sacrifice enabled the world.

So we have energy and grace in Sky Woman, bed rock in Turtle and soil in sacrifice. What's missing? What requirement remains unmet in order to create the world? Well, according to the story we've told over these last few weeks, it's tension. Maybe even conflict.

I hate conflict. So this part of the story in an arrow straight to my heart. Which makes it all the more important that I hear it.

Indeed, this part of the story is so important right now... and always. We have tensions within us, conflict in our community (from time to time), and - booooooyyyy howdy - two ticks from civil war in our body politic. Each of these can lead to everything from malaise to terror to violence. They can easily be cause for despair.

But they can also be creative. So says this creation story. Maybe I'm reading it wrong. Maybe if I was from its home culture I'd have a different sense of it. Maybe not. But as I hear it, from my social location, as this story evolves itself through my filters, I see it as saying that conflict can be creative.

Now, I am conflict averse. I wish I wasn't. I wish I was a benevolent brutal-truth kind of guy. I admire that guy. But I'm not that guy. So it may be odd that this claim made by the story... well... it actually brings me... peace. It refocuses my view from the immediate striving against evil and corruption to the faith that from this conflict - whatever conflict it is - from this tension... something new and nourishing will, in due course and of necessity, emerge.

And that faith, that perspective has the power to lift me out of my reactivity, which in turn equips me to proceed with more equanimity and a strength not hijacked by anger. Achieving that perspective requires attention and effort on my part. It's not easy. But it gives me assurance. This is how the world is made.

And unlike the creation myth of OUR home culture, the Houdenoshone world is made by community. Never just one person. It was made by the spiritual energy of Sky Woman, the faith found in Swans, the strength of the turtle, the sacrifice of the muskrat, the tension of the brothers. A whole thematic panoply. A community. All necessary. Without one, including the left handed brother... without one; none.

In fact, I want to quote our story teller today, Bob, who, in reflecting on this story earlier this week wrote, "Communities of all sizes... require the harmonizing of many differences. Someone brings knowledge, someone brings food, someone protects and nourishes, someone else questions and challenges. One may see dangers that others don't, while others welcome and celebrate blessings. The community learns to live with differences without allowing them to destroy the richness of the individuals or the diversity in the whole.

This story of the Haudenosaunee," Bob continues, "and the creation of Turtle Island reminds us as well of both the origins and stewardship of the land. In this increasingly technological age, the narrative reminds us that all communities not only have responsibilities for the diversity of their members, but also to the natural mechanisms that keep our world alive."

So friends, here's the takeaway: Let a shooting star be your reminder of this tale and its lessons of community, sacrifice, and conflict. Allow swans to draw your mind to the necessity of faith. And if you see a muskrat - or maybe any rodent (because I don't imagine we often see muskrats), maybe it is time to be thankful. You can thank the muskrat.

That thanks is a prayer and now - as we will explore more fully in a couple of weeks - with prayer you are open to a wider kind of community. Maybe you can think of that gratitude as a seed and allow it to grow.

By your attention and care - your dance, your prayer, your gratitude - you may allow your community and community of meaning to grow. And with it, your knowledge that life is a gift

and contains sacrifice. And then settle into the question: what gift will you give today? What sacrifice will you make to secure it? What will you make sacred? How will you recognize the sanctity of the world? How will you have faith in the midst of conflict or disappointment? How does community - this community and big community - continually recreate your world?