

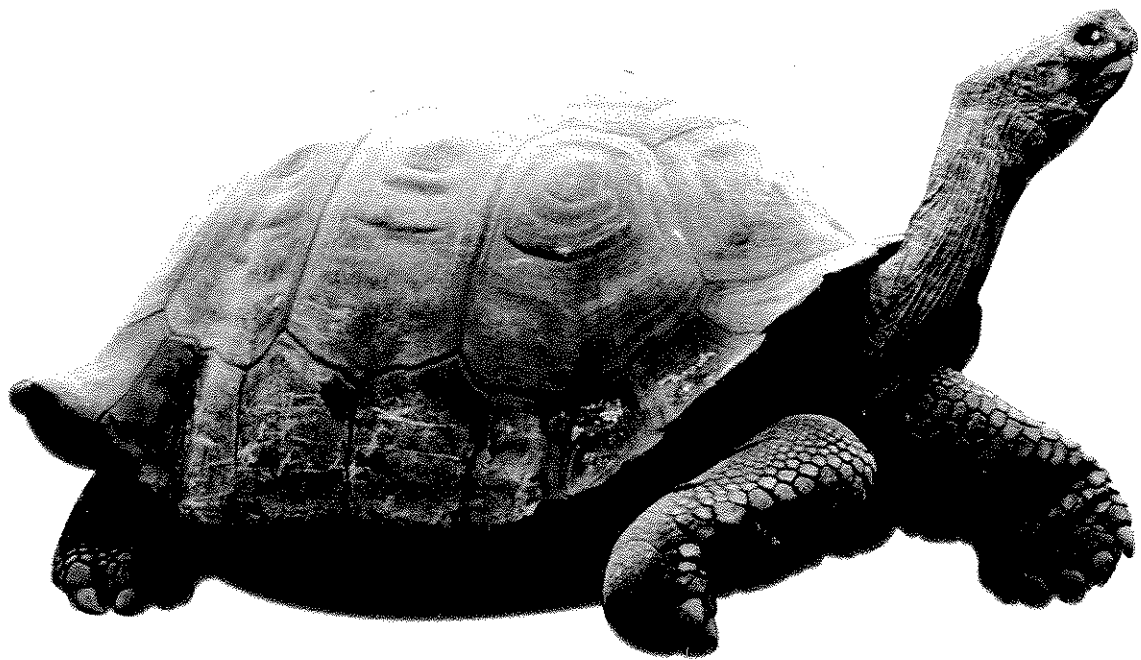
The Earth on Turtle's Back

(Onondaga-Northeast Woodlands)

Retold by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac

Background

Native Americans have great respect for the natural world. They believe that each creature has its own power by which it maintains itself and affects others. Each Native American culture has its own name for this power, but many Native American cultures recognize a Great Spirit—an invisible power that is the source of life and good for humans. Many of the animals that helped feed and clothe the early Native Americans are also highly revered. Native American folklore, much of which portrays animals, reflects this great respect.



What does the Skyland Chief's wife dream?

Reading Check

Literary Analysis How do the opening words of this story identify it as an origin myth?

Reading Strategy Recognizing Cultural Details What do the chief's words to his wife tell you about the beliefs of the Onondaga?

Before this Earth existed, there was only water. It stretched as far as one could see, and in that water there were birds and animals swimming around. Far above, in the clouds, there was a Skyland. In that Skyland there was a great and beautiful tree. It had four white roots which stretched to each of the sacred directions,¹ and from its branches all kinds of fruits and flowers grew. There was an ancient chief in the Skyland. His young wife was expecting a child, and one night she dreamed that she saw the Great Tree uprooted. The next day she told her husband the story. He nodded as she finished telling her dream. "My wife," he said, "I am sad that you had this dream. It is clearly a dream of great power and, as is our way, when one has such a powerful dream we must do all we can to make it true. The Great Tree must be uprooted."

Then the Ancient Chief called the young men together and told them that they must pull up the tree. But the roots of the tree were so deep, so strong, that they could not budge it. At last the Ancient Chief himself came to the tree. He wrapped his arms around it, bent his knees and strained. At last, with one great effort, he uprooted the tree and placed it on its side. Where the tree's roots had gone deep into the Skyland there was now a big hole. The wife of the chief came close and leaned over to look down, grasping the tip of one of the Great Tree's branches to steady her. It seemed as if she saw something down there, far below, glittering like water. She leaned out further to look and, as she leaned, she lost her balance and fell into the hole.

Her grasp slipped off the tip of the branch, leaving her with only a handful of seeds as she fell, down, down, down, down.

Far below, in the waters, some of the birds and animals looked up. "Someone is falling toward us from the sky," said one of the birds. "We must do something to help her," said another. Then two Swans flew up. They caught the Woman From The Sky between their wide wings. Slowly, they began to bring her down toward the water, where the birds and animals were watching.

"She is not like us," said one of the animals. "Look, she doesn't have webbed feet. I don't think she can live in the water."

"What shall we do, then?" said another of the water animals. "I know," said one of the water birds. "I have heard that there is Earth far below the waters. If we dive down and bring up Earth, then she will have a place to stand."

So the birds and animals decided that someone would have to bring up Earth. One by one they tried.

The Duck dove first, some say. He swam down and down, far beneath the surface, but could not reach the bottom and floated back up. Then the Beaver tried. He went even deeper, so deep that

1. the sacred directions North, South, East, and West

Critical Viewing What characteristics of this turtle are explained in this origin myth? [Connect]

it all was dark, but he could not reach the bottom, either. The Loon tried, swimming with his strong wings. He was gone a long long time, but he, too, failed to bring up Earth. Soon it seemed that all had tried and all had failed. Then a small voice spoke.

"I will bring up Earth or die trying."

They looked to see who it was. It was the tiny Muskrat. She dove down and swam and swam. She was not as strong or as swift as the others, but she was determined. She went so deep that it was all dark, and still she swam deeper. She swam so deep that her lungs felt ready to burst, but she swam deeper still. At last, just as she was becoming unconscious, she reached out one small paw and grasped at the bottom, barely touching it before she floated up, almost dead.

When the other animals saw her break the surface they thought she had failed. Then they saw her right paw was held tightly shut.

"She has the Earth," they said. "Now where can we put it?"

"Place it on my back," said a deep voice. It was the Great Turtle, who had come up from the depths.

They brought the Muskrat over to the Great Turtle and placed her paw against his back. To this day there are marks at the back of the Turtle's shell which were made by the Muskrat's paw. The tiny bit of Earth fell on the back of the Turtle. Almost immediately, it began to grow larger and larger and larger until it became the whole world.

Then the two Swans brought the Sky Woman down. She stepped onto the new Earth and opened her hand, letting the seeds fall onto the bare soil. From those seeds the trees and the grass sprang up. Life on Earth had begun.

Literary Analysis
Origin Myths and the Oral Tradition In oral literature, why might characters have generic names like "Loon" or "Muskrat"?

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** If you had been the Great Chief, would you have pulled up the Great Tree? Explain your answer.
2. (a) **Recall:** Explain what happened to the wife of the chief when the young men uprooted the Great Tree. (b) **Interpret:** Why did this action generate concern among the animals?
3. (a) **Recall:** Describe the actions of the swans, the beaver, and the duck. (b) **Analyze:** How do these actions exhibit the best aspects of human nature?
4. (a) **Infer:** Whom do the Onondaga credit with bringing Earth into existence? (b) **Analyze:** From this myth, what can you conclude about the relationship between the Onondaga and their natural environment? Explain your answer.
5. **Generalize:** Muskrat makes a risky and desperate swim. How does society benefit from brave actions like this?